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The Death of Jason Darby

GEORGIA ELIZABETH TAYLOR
The successful novel of a fated
and haunting love.



The Fateful Embrace

Who was the mysterious man who appeared in Benjamin Thorn's dreams . . . who gained control over his pen . . . who began to be master of his waking life . . . ?

Who was the beautiful woman who appeared nightly in Benjamin Thorn's rooms . . . who drew him into her avid embrace . . . who claimed to be a lady long moldering in her tomb . . . ?

In an isolated manor in the north of England, a handsome, tormented man, a bewitching young girl, and a diabolical curse from the undead past combine to ensure that you will never forget the shattering truth about—

The Death of Jason Darby

FROM SIGNET

The explosive new novel of Youth and Revolution by the author of

LAST SUMMER & SONS

EVAN
HUNTER

NOBODY KNEW
THEY WERE
THERE

CLARISSA

was the name of the spectral beauty who came to Benjamin Thorn by night and filled him with an aching longing.

CLARISSA

was also the name of the young girl whose sunlit loveliness and flashing wit captivated Benjamin by day.

Benjamin Thorn was enslaved by both—he was their lover, their victim, their helpless pawn. One a creature of light, the other a creature of darkness—together they played out their unearthly game of vengeance from beyond the grave . . .

The Death
of
JASON DARBY

GEORGIA ELIZABETH TAYLOR



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We have no title-deeds to house or lands;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands,
And hold in mortmain still their old estates.

—“*Haunted Houses*,”

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Part

ONE

◆ CHAPTER ONE ◆

London was afame. Hundreds of bonfires burned in the streets, for the cremation of cats, around which a mob danced and yowled. It was the night of All Hallow's Eve. The rabble was masked and drunken. There was a surface gaiety, but under the merry facade lurked a sinister dread of the demons that stalked the earth this night. Coffins were opening, corpses rising to join the witches and warlocks in a Black Mass. Clergymen strolled among the crowds, offering hurried, ashen-faced exorcisms to those who had fallen under the fury of the ravaging shades. A wind screamed overhead, whipping through the alleys and streets, sending fog-choked gusts hither-thither in search of an unobstructed course, its chilling breath squeezing through the seams of ramshackle buildings to snuff out candles and lamps; the very breath of the Devil.

High above Huxley Square, in his garret rooms, Benjamin shivered, the cold seeping into his veins to chill his blood. The straw in his mattress stabbed into his flesh, through his threadbare shirt and hose, like the forked prongs of the Devil's scepter. He thrashed over on his back to stare at the black ceiling. The collective bellow of the mob below in the square rose, a melancholy dirge on the wind, and he was overwhelmed by an unbearable despair. He felt as though his soul were being dragged from his body, caught up as a leaf in a whirlpool to spin inconsolably in empty space. Who was he?—where was he?—he asked himself frantically, in an attempt to hold on to the thin threads of identity. Benjamin Thorn. Aspirant author. A chest full of unpublished mediocrities, the sum total of seven years' literary dedication. Benjamin Thorn. Twenty years and six. Born in the borough of Croydon, 6th November, 1752. For one pound weekly, sometimes apprentice in the printing of the works of those more talented than himself—or those at least more successful in peddling their mediocre works than he. He was Benjamin Thorn—nothing was more important to remember at this moment than that not always apparent fact.

Educated at Pemhroke Hall, Cambridge. He did not know a woman named Clarissa—he did not know her. There as no one in this room but himself; himself—Benjamin Thorn.

His throat dry, Benjamin swung his legs off the bed. He fumhled in the dark for the hottle of gin. His head was splitting. Angrily he slammed an arm across the littered table, sending paper, pens, and ink jars clattering to the floor. He lunged to his feet and stumhled to the grimy little window. The gin bottle was on the sill, two-thirds empty.

"Cease that racket, damn you—filthy rabble!" he shouted at the window to the yowling mob below. He hauled the cork free with his teeth and put the bottle to his mouth, swallowing the burning poison in desperate gulps. Wiping an arm across his mouth, the stuff hot in his innards, he let his eye slide around the room. She had not left. He could not pretend any longer that she was gone, or nonexistent. Like a dozen close-huddled fireflies, she shimmered in the darkness near the door, two white globes full center, her living eyes. His hands flew up to cover his face. The nearly empty bottle crashed to the floor; splintering glass sprayed in every direction around his feet. He felt her moving toward him. "No—" he whispered, stiffening. . . . waiting for her touch against his flesh. But no touch came. Her voice, like wailing wind through harren trees in winter, sighed halefully, "... Jason."

"I am—*Benjamin Thorn*," he cried, behind fingers that dug into his face. "Go away. My God! leave me be—give me a moment's peace."

"Oh—Jason—Jason."

Suddenly he was alone, devastatingly alone. His hands flashed away from his face and his eyes hungrily searched the blackness for her image, her name on the tip of his tongue, as if that half of him which was a stranger would cry after her, "—Clarissa! Don't leave me . . . come back!" with an inexplicable desperation and longing. He, Benjamin Thorn, had not loved a woman in all his life. He had never known a woman named Clarissa—never. The gin, it was the gin. His head was swimming, tongue thickening. He stepped backward. When his legs struck the wooden framework of the bed he fell back, arms outstretched. He reminded himself to wake before midday, for an appointment with Radcliff, then slid into a drugged, blessedly

"Benjy . . . I say, are you listening?"

Benjamin's eyes quickly darted up to study Radcliff's face, a craggy, sallow conglomeration of features that would better have suited a clergyman than a hopeful painter of portraits and a staunch defender of English imperialistic rights in the colonies. Despite the fact that Lord North himself, the ailing war minister, had proclaimed defeat to be inevitable, Radcliff loudly proclaimed his allegiance to the "just war." Benjamin concurred with Rockingham: the colonies should be abandoned; the war was an appalling waste of money, men, and time.

"I say, old man, where *is* your mind? I would jolly well bet you haven't heard a word I've said."

"Sorry, Radcliff—wandering a bit, I'm afraid."

Radcliff Brandon pursed his lips and carefully examined his companion. He had been at school with the fellow, had known him some nine years now. But he didn't know him. Benjy was an enigma: one day up, down the next. Today, Benjamin's hazel eyes were deep-set, dark, and unreadable. His brown hair was falling in bedraggled wisps from the ribbon that tied it at the back of his neck. He refused to wear a proper wig. In fact, Benjamin refused to conform to all the niceties of London middle-class society, save those convenient to him, which were few indeed. A veritable recluse. Art was one thing, creativity and all that, but one could carry creative fervor too far. He was a good-looking chap, when he managed to be neat and halfway decently dressed: tall, a bit thin, but sturdily built. Today, he was an embarrassment. Anyone of refinement passing by would think Radcliff Brandon was familiarizing with beggars, Huxley Square rabble.

"I was saying," Radcliff said petulantly, ignoring the rousing song of two lowly types at the far side of the nearly deserted gin shop, "... about this stock. There seems to be no limit to how far it will rise. Fifty thousand of the black devils were shipped last year, and the South African Slave Company expects to double—"

"Slaves," Benjamin interrupted accusingly. "A filthy business." He kept his eyes on the swirling, clear liquid in his cup. "A rotten way to turn a profit."

Radcliff screwed his mouth into a tight knot. "I'd say it's a pretty rotten way you're living, trying to make a profit. When will you chuck this bloody nonsense about becoming another Addison or Defoe, and start making something of yourself?"

Benjamin glanced up to glare at the man, his long nose quivering, obviously holding a tight rein on a ruffled

temper. "Myself?" he grumbled sourly. "... And just who and what might that be?"

"Coo, listen to you, the philosopher—hark, the age-old question. The difficulty with you, old man, is that you are tragically unoriginal, a man with no fresh thoughts or ideas. What sogs your paper? Excruciating self-analysis. No one wants to read about Benjamin Thorn's personal struggle with identity. How you bear that slimy garret escapes me, a man of your background."

"It is what I can afford," Benjamin snapped. "On the ten pounds six I receive from the trust left me by my grandmother, I manage honestly, with a shilling here and there when I get a job."

"A stinking, slimy hole—I wouldn't step foot in the place again; once was enough. And look at you. Your hose looks as though it should have been deposited in a poor box six months ago. Your waistcoat was white originally, I would guess. Really, Benjy, as a friend . . ."

"If you were a friend," Benjamin growled irritably, "you'd shut your damned mouth."

"Here now—that wasn't necessary."

"Do I lecture you on the prostitution of art for the sake of fat fees? Or question your penchant for living five times beyond your means, on money you beg, borrow, and often steal? Or ridicule your wild schemes for becoming rich quickly?—which you never do; you only get poorer and less inclined to admit you're poor."

Radcliff smiled, as if he had somehow triumphed. "What are you writing now, eh?" he asked in a mild voice.

Benjamin scowled fiercely and drained the tin cup. He banged the utensil on the wooden table, calling for more gin.

"You're hitting the gin pretty hard, old chap. Not going well, the new work?"

"There *is* no new work," Benjamin shouted defensively. "I burn my pages, to keep my hands warm."

"Like that, eh?" Radcliff said sympathetically. "Never mind, it will come. Anyone keeps at it like you do has to be successful in the end. What did MacKenna think of the novel?"

"He threw it in my face and laughed, a cute, ladylike little chuckle under his breath. No other critical comment did he have to offer."

"Well, never mind, it'll come . . ."

Benjamin lunged to his feet and slammed two coins on

the table. "You said that, Radcliff," he said huskily. "But I do mind, very much."

With that, Benjamin strode out of the gin shop, offering no farewell to his friend. Outside, the sun was trying to seep through a thick, high fog that sifted down like misty rain to wet the treacherous street. A vegetable wagon rattled by, its mountains of green a taunt to him. Pulling his muffler up around his chin, Benjamin braved the jagged stones, keeping his eyes alert on his two feet. Pools of muck and water had collected in the gulleys formed by misshapen stones. Many a leg had been broken, when eyes wandered carelessly. A chamber pot appeared in a window above. Benjamin did not see it, or the surly wench holding it. She turned it over with a bitter smile on her face, and the putrid slop filled the deeply inverted crown of his hat and sprayed all over him. He shouted curses at the hastily vacated window. Carefully lifting his hat from his head, his stomach heaving, for in five years he had not become used to the massive putridity that was London, he shook the foulness to the street, then replaced the hat with purposeful fortitude.

He stopped at the stationer's and spent half his cache of shillings on ink and paper. Master Briggs commented on the dismal weather, as he always did.

"One day o' summer, in the year just passed—the Devil's own work. And this 'ere winter, now I never seen the like; it'll snow before nightfall, wait and see. . . . White paper, Master Thorn?"

"No, the coarse stuff will do."

"Just pen-scratchin, are ya?"

"Just mind-wandering, Master Briggs . . . to pass the time."

On leaving the stationer's, Benjamin turned up a narrow alley. In a cluttered, musty, and painfully noisy basement shop, he made a token request for work and was gruffly denied. He passed by the Printers' Trade Guild; at least forty men hovered outside the tunnel entrance like vultures over a carcass. One of the men might get a job today. He went on by, thinking he'd not be able to eat much in the five days ahead, until Monday next, when he'd walk the two miles to the Bank of England and collect his ten pounds six.

Huxley Square was vulgarly boisterous as usual. Two women were fighting over a head of cabbage that had fallen from the vegetable cart, the peddler in the middle trying to get his cabbage back. A crowd cheered them on. The rabble laughed, but Benjamin saw lust in their gaunt

eyes, lust for a cabbage. Not one of them had seen meat in many months. The population of London had exploded so swiftly that no amount of ingenuity in farming improvements could keep pace with the hue and cry of the hungry citizenry. Prices were so high only the rich could eat well.

Benjamin turned into his scarred lath-and-plaster-faced building, a remnant of the Middle Ages and a survivor of the great fire. He trudged round and round the dangerously dark, narrow staircase, rising steadily, kicking aside debris that blocked his step and threatened to trip him.

"—Oo's that?" old Aggie Bingham shrieked from behind her door, as he reached the garret level.

"Savage Johnny Black, the highwayman," Benjamin shouted coarsely, "come to ravage thee and steal thy jewels."

Silence met his attempt at humor. Too much truth in what he had said, he thought. The old biddy spent her empty life dreaming of an attacker, but she had nothing any man would want, poor soul.

Benjamin hesitated before the door of his rooms, steeling himself. Would she be there? he asked himself—was she waiting for him? The mottled door loomed before him, and he considered the men who had entered here over the centuries before him, and what *they* had found inside. At last he put his rusted key in the lock and threw open the door. An envelope was on the floor, a post from Croydon. He stooped to pick it up. From his mother. He carried the letter to his writing table and dropped it on a loose stack of manuscript pages, putting the package from the stationer's beside it.

Staring at the letter, Benjamin thought it was probably guilt more than any other excuse he could rationalize that caused the resentment he felt now at his mother's intrusion, this way, into his life. She knew him as her son, brought from her own flesh, and he knew himself to be a stranger and no more to her. Why? His life was an endless circle of why's with no answers. He had seen her on no more than three occasions since leaving Croydon for Pembroke, and could now only vaguely recall the features of her face. A plain woman. Uncomplicated and unsophisticated—to such a degree that her presence was intolerable to him. A Puritan by faith, by word, and deed—most particularly by word: God, God, God, every other word she uttered. *He* would provide, but when *He* did not—ah, but *He* moves in mysterious ways. . . . Rot. Absolute rot! His father? He was a preacher, too, not by profession but

by inclination. And there was nothing Benjamin resented more than being preached at, a form of mental torture inflicted on him by his father from the moment of his arrival at Croydon until his departure, on those rare and far-between occasions when he had allowed guilt and a sense of duty to guide him, rather than his usual good sense.

He picked up the letter to open it, then dropped it again. He knew every word without reading it. Why didn't he write? Was he ill? Wouldn't he please consider giving up and returning to those who loved him so? They lived in terror for him, the city plagued as it was with swarms of godless cutthroats and thieves. And more, about God.

Impatiently, Benjamin turned and threw himself on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Trying to put his parents out of his mind, he sighed and thanked his mother's God that Clarissa was not here, for the moment. He tried to remember when she had first come to haunt him. As if he could forget that night; it was five years ago, in the room on Bergen Street, near the Thames—20th October, 1773. He had been at the completion of his first novel for eight straight hours, his fingers stiff, his arm aching to the shoulder. Suddenly, the candles by which he worked were snuffed out, as by a sighing breath, but no wind blew outside, and he had felt no draft.

"Ja–son," a hissing voice had whispered behind him.
"—Jason. Jason . . ."

He had thought himself driven to delusion by overwork, and tried to shake off the nagging sense of being watched. His flesh crawled as the name was sighed again. He ran from the room, taking himself to a gin house where he quickly became satisfactorily stupefied. But when he returned, not only the voice but a pair of flaming eyes met him. He moved to this squalid garret, but she followed . . . She was inescapable, whoever, whatever she was.

His mother would say that he was possessed by the very demons of hell, and would demand that he exorcise the fiends through the offices of some dogmatic, zealous preacher of the faith. The truth of it, he feared, was that Benjamin Thorn had at last properly gone over the brink into a black insanity.

All his life he had felt half one person, half another. His father had said often, with a decided note of contempt in his cloth-merchant's polite twang, that his son was "peculiar." *Peculiar*—the word was single and unembellished by adjectives and qualifications, but it conveyed a multitude of accusations and truths. Indeed, he was most peculiar.

When he was just learning to talk, around the age of eighteen months, according to his mother's oft-repeated story, he had insisted that his name was Jason. For some years he had stubbornly called himself Jason, until a severe thrashing with a switch convinced him that discretion was the better part of persevering. He thereafter convenienced his father's rugged determinism, secretly thinking what he pleased. He drew into himself, erecting a wall of defiance between his family and Jason.

At Pembroke he did exceptionally well scholastically, but there again, Jason plagued him. Jason knew the texts before opening them. Benjamin Thorn was on one occasion accused of cheating, brazenly, without any effort to change the text written for him by some unknown accomplice. When he bitterly denied the accusation, the work he had submitted was aggressively flaunted before his eyes, with a demand to know whether that belabored, tortuous scrawl could in any way be construed as his handwriting. It wasn't. Jason had written the thesis. Benjamin demurred, of course. There was no explaining Jason. Thereafter, he made a careful check of the pages he was to submit, often forced to write over two and three times before managing his own distinctive, fine hand. Gradually he developed a power over Jason, and was able to keep him, for the most part, out of his work, so that care with his handwriting became less necessary.

Then the voice, the eyes, had come to haunt him, incessantly calling Jason's name. It became increasingly difficult to maintain a balance between his two selves. He began to slip completely out of Benjamin until he was entirely Jason. The voice and the eyes were not real, only the illusions of a lunatic, a mirage conjured in a spell of derangement, he told himself. Benjamin Thorn did not believe in ghosts, but he suspected that *Jason* did. Whenever the whispering, ethereal woman entered the garret, *Jason* fought for supremacy, as if dashing hell-bent from a dark moor of obscurity toward something bright which he loved feverishly . . . Benjamin was decidedly skeptical about the legitimacy of love, an illusive matter to be sure, certainly indefinable and reserved for a privileged few, if it existed at all in human relations.

Benjamin lay on the bed without inclination to move. The room was dark; it was never light. The grayness of London's climate was nothing compared to the gloominess of the city's inner chambers. Through the multipaned, age-corroded window only a diffused haze seeped through. Rats shared these humble quarters, and many species of

vermin. More than one ghost haunted this prehistoric pesthole, probably untold numbers, as variant as the species of vermin. Benjamin speculated on whether fleas had ghosts that visited themselves on living fleas.

In disgust he rolled off the bed and stood before his work table. For want of a better outlet for his frazzled disposition, he savagely took up a handful of filled pages and mutilated them cruelly. Then he felt as though he had murdered a child of his flesh, suffering an impulse to weep in testimony of his grief and guilt. He was an abominable writer. Radcliff was right; he should chuck the whole business. But what of the seven years invested in hope, in that shining, noble purpose that neither hunger nor cold nor verminous attics could quiet? To give up now would be an admission that he had been wasting all those hours and years, that he was, after all, a merchant's son, never to rise above that station.

In the back of his mind a vision lurked. From as far back as he could recall, he had held this vision sacred. He stood on a rise of land; the sea foamed below him and around him on three sides. Turning, he would gaze across the inlet; there, like a tranquil hermitage, lay a sprawling manor of stone and frame. It was more glass than wall, the sun reflecting off the glass in lightning flashes that made the house seem diamond-studded from where he stood on the headland. To the north there was a grove of trees, under which white rhododendrons sprawled in passionate embrace with lacy ferns and stately foxgloves. The winding road to the house was hedged with blooming, blood-red roses. Flowering vines snaked and intertwined in a purposeful march up the manor's expanses of stone and wood, reaching across the panes of glass in places. It was the house of a nobleman, and it was his. And he had lived all his life following a path that led to that manor house by the sea.

No amount of rationalization had succeeded in shaking that illusion from his mind. Mere bourgeois envy of the elite, he would tell himself. He could not deny a certain pique that he was, by a nasty trick of fate, born to Puritan Jacob Thorn and not to the Earl of Sussex. *Above these humble origins I will rise*—a pathetic conceit, as well as an insult to the nobility of God's chosen, the ordinary man: had He not made so many of them? Which was a conceit upon a conceit. And so Benjamin's mind would run on, over this field of conjecture, this mire of supposition, coming to a halt in the exact same spot from which

he had begun his mental trek, in a state of utter confusion and defeat, plagued as before by Jason and the ghost of a woman.

Benjamin fell into his rickety chair, hauling the table close to him. He lit three short candles and set the holders about the table so that he could follow the flow of words he hoped would spill from his pen. Before him, he placed a small stack of the paper he had just purchased. He opened the jar of ink, dipped his pen, and proceeded to chew the end of the pen. The ink dried, so he dipped the pen again. No words came. Benjamin was most urgently opposed to Jason when he was at work, never allowing the man one ounce of precedence. It was sufficient that Jason had gotten him through Pembroke; he would not also take the credit for creative genius, if any such genius ever came forth from this eternally disappointing investment of time.

The Crier in the square called the hour of seven, and still he had not written a word. He was hungry, but refused to allow his stomach to prevail over his fever to compose.

"Ja—son . . ."

Benjamin whirled around in the chair, his heart leaping in his chest. She was there, reaching for him.

"What do you want of me?" he shouted emotionally.
"Tell me, and have done with it."

"Oh—Jason," she moaned.

He threw himself back around and let his head fall to the table in utter frustration. Slowly the coldness washed over him like the sea over yielding rocks. He felt her hand touch his. Uttering a cry of defeat, Benjamin gave way to Jason. He picked up his pen again and began to write, surely and purposefully, teeth biting into his lips in his great urgency.

Benjamin woke with a start. He did not know how long he had slept, could not remember going to bed. For a moment he held his breath, vaguely recalling that he had at last let the walls tumble down, completely surrendering to the will of Jason. His head snapped around and he stared at his work table. Exploding to his feet, he clutched up a thin pile of filled pages. The handwriting was familiar but not his own. His eyes widened as he read. Falling back to sit slump-shouldered on the edge of the bed, he squinted to see in the gray haze. After reading one page, he

went back and read slowly. It was as if he had never seen the words before, yet during the night his own hand had written them.

JASON DARBY

An Autobiography

I will not begin with my birth, nor that of my father. So much of what I am, what I hope and fear, cherish and endure, is imbedded in the past, in the roots of Hedgewood Manor, in the stalwart purpose of Hugh Darby.

The history of Hugh Darby's early years is obscure, and has been the subject of much family conjecture, though it is generally agreed that he came from a seafaring family and himself took early to the sea. Hugh Darby was a dark and surly man, with a mind as keen as the sharp edge of a sword, as boundless as the sea he loved, and as absorbent as a sponge. He was both Scottish and English and took either one side or the other, whichever best suited his purpose of the moment. He was not a patriotic man, loving himself and life above all else. He lived in a time when there were still those who were born to rule and command, and those born to obey and serve. Every man knew his place in the ordered ranks of society. Hugh Darby knew his place, but he refused to accept it, and all his days attracted to himself the jealous disapprobation of those he aspired to equal.

In the year 1530, Hugh Darby set sail for the Spanish Americas under the auspices of an obscure Scottish trading company. He returned in 1532 with a Spanish wife and a cargo of silver which, according to his bargain, he shared on a fifty percent basis with the trading company. There was some mention of a Spanish Government complaint that their colonial rights had been usurped, but Hugh Darby, with the £40,000 he had gained, took no notice. He forsook the sea, and, through shrewd investments, increased his fortune. In the year 1540, Hugh Darby purchased the confiscated monastery of Saint Jerome, Yorkshire, and its lands, the Crown having that year set upon the disposal of such properties.

All across the land the monasteries and convents, which had for so many centuries been familiar ed-

ifices of the medieval landscape, had become crumbled, roofless, desolate tombs of an age gone by. Neglect and decay had quickly overtaken them. King Henry VIII had hungered after them and swallowed them, thinking to turn their profits to his advantage after his split with the Pope. Hedges had gone wild, covering mearing stones, balks, and headlands. Rampart walls had been broken down and the stones used for new buildings. But when Hugh Darby first stood on the land of Saint Jerome, he saw not ruin or decay, but envisioned a splendid manor house built around the frame of the dead monastery, and he was not to halt in his purpose until it was as he envisioned.

Hedgewood Manor was completed in the year 1545. By that time the Darby Woolen Company was reaping enormous profits in the cloth export boom. Hugh Darby was despised by the local gentry, who considered him an upstart and a threat to the sanctity of good blood. The Grandisons of Briarmoor were particularly hostile. Sir Ronald Grandison proudly traced his ancestry to a ninth-century Norse chief, Thorvald Skyllison, and to the Baron Knight of the twelfth century, Arthur of Hull. But when the upstart Scotsman, as Hugh Darby was referred to with a most poisonous pronunciation of contempt, became wealthier than his betters, there was nothing for it, to save the face of their class, but to give the upstart Scotsman a title of some little importance. A grave mistake. With the power of political voice, Hugh Darby, man of all talents that he was, orated and bribed his way into the House of Commons.

In late 1550, Squire Hugh Darby sold the entire stock in his thriving Woolen Company to an astonished and grasping Sir Ronald Grandison, for a sum of £ 200,000. Four months later Sir Ronald discovered what Hugh Darby had been astute enough to guess, that the cloth boom had stimulated overproduction. The market for woolen goods was flooded. The shopkeepers of London had taken all they could hope to dispose of, and the exporters were left with large unsaleable stocks on their hands. The inevitable slump had come, creating widespread unemployment. It was the greatest financial disaster of the century, with bankruptcies multiplying daily, but Squire Hugh Darby was none the worse. Sir Ronald barely escaped financial oblivion.

With the sterling profit from his sale to Sir Ronald,

Hugh Darby immediately set upon the enclosure of his lands. Far fields under title to him were traded for those gentry lands adjacent. Sir Ronald was forced to sell valuable lands to Hugh Darby in order to restore his financial solidarity. The commons were swallowed into the whole, with tenant farmers paid for their leases and set to work as farm laborers; most drifted away in defeat to the cities, swelling the populations of the urban areas, as many other land-owners followed Hugh Darby's example. Agriculture, new and improved, Hugh Darby vowed, would make him richer still, and it did; and his sons after him, and their sons. And through the century and a quarter that passed before my birth, in 1675, at Hedgewood Manor, the hate between the Grandisons and the Darbys flickered, an undying ember. That land sold to Hugh Darby has always been considered by the Grandisons to have been stolen from them.

I, Jason Darby, descendant of Hugh Darby, love with all my soul this land the Scottish seaman gave to me. How often I stood as a small boy on the rise of the headland, turning round and round—to see the sweet heather on the far moors, the rhododendrons white as snow, held in ribbons of ferns and foxgloves, shaded by firs and beech. I would gaze adoringly at Hedgewood Manor, the walls more glass than stone or wood, and my breast would fill with an inrush of sea air and renewed pride. It was mine. I was the last of the line, the only child of George Darby. Hedgewood Manor belonged to me, and from me it would go down to my son. But I have not had a son.

When I was nineteen, I was brought home to Yorkshire by the death of my elderly father, who had sired me quite late in life; my education at Cambridge was interrupted in the second year. I returned to the headland where I had stood so often as a boy. And that spring day I saw a new beauty. The new brightness was a dot on the sprawling green lawn in the distance. It was Clarissa, quite grown-up and breathtakingly beautiful.

"*Clarissa!*" Benjamin hissed, the papers falling from his hands.

He shook his head hard, as if by doing so he could expel the hurricane of confused thoughts raging in his brain. As some of the implications of the narrative slowly became apparent to him, he writhed where he sat, then

shivered in a wave of cold dread. The flow of words was concise and unaffected, as if simple truths were being narrated, not a tale of fiction but, as the title implied, autobiographical reportage. That part of himself that was a stranger was implying on these pages that he had a history of his own, an identity and a time distinctly separated from the existence of Benjamin Thorn in whose flesh he dwelt. An appalling conjecture. The mind could conceive that a man could harbor two selves, opposing each other, as the opposing forces of good and evil live in the same entity. But to begin on the theory that one body could house two complete personalities staggered the reason. And then to propose that one of those personalities was born seventy-seven years before the other brought the mind up short, rearing like a stallion at a cliff edge, the mind turning heel to race back toward the comfortable, time-honored illusion of divine origin, original sin, and the single purpose of existence being that of redemption, the soul forever departing from this earth at the instant of death, that soul in no way dualistic but singularly individualistic.

H heretofore he had vaguely understood Jason to be the better half of himself, a name he had given long ago to his secret life, a person known only to himself and grossly misunderstood by others; Jason, longing to soar to the skies, while Benjamin kept his feet on the ground. In all common sense, no real distinction could be made between himself and Jason. The narrative had to be an outpouring of the hidden consciousness, that which he called Jason forming the nucleus around which old dreams and lost hopes were expressed. But the Grandison name, those facts about that old and noble family could not be denied as truths, since every citizen of England at least vaguely knew the history of that family. Again, an outpouring of facts well known to him. But, if that much were truth, the entire narrative well might be historical fact.

The suspicion that all he had written was truth was followed by the possibility that he was possessed by one dead. The specter of soulful sighs and yearning glances called only to Jason. But she was not real, only the creation of dementia; she could not be real. Yet the name—Clarissa—was the same name mentioned in the last sentence of the narrative. Still another instance of inserting a name familiar to him; a most uncomfortable familiarity.

For all his fear, trembling, and confusion, Benjamin knew that he would not forsake the work that was begun.

He had to know the truth if he were to save his sanity, and he had a strong feeling that this work was exactly what the specter, real or imagined, had wanted of him; that the autobiography had been lying dormant in him all these years, struggling futilely against the walls he had put up to prevent Jason's interference, a self-imposed censorship suppressing the truest words he had in him to say.

Benjamin shivered and hugged his arms tight around his chest, as if to hold himself intact. He thought wryly that if detachment from self was what had been missing in his work, he had made a cracking good beginning with this autobiography.

◆ CHAPTER TWO ◆

After two months of entranced labor on the autobiography, Benjamin had become so used to the bizarre and astounding that if the Crier had called one night that the sky was falling in, he would have immediately believed it and begun to prepare himself for the hereafter. Nonetheless, he was considerably shaken on a bitterly cold January Sunday, and by nothing more than a column in a daily tabloid that had mysteriously found its way to his rooms. He never read the tabloids; he despised their bias and penchant for scandal. Essentially, he was a Royalist, though it was quite out of date today to be a firm devotee of divine right, or rule by succession. The son or cousin of a king was as fit to rule as any ambitious politician. That the people should rule themselves was an appalling idea: God save men from the rule of their peers. The tabloids invariably sided with the mob against the Crown, since the mob feathered the tabloids' nests by purchasing their sheets, and now the tabloids were against the Crown out of a new and delicious Crown leniency in regard to what was or was not treasonous.

But Benjamin took up the sheet, letting his eyes fall until the word "Grandison" in bold type caught his eyes. The column read:

Mistress Clarissa Grandison, grandniece of Lord Percival Grandison M.P., has joined her great-uncle at his Briarmoor Town House on the Thames. The

young spinster, heiress of Hedgewood Manor, Yorkshire, an estate once held by the now extinct Darby family, spoke of a grand tour of the clothiers during her sojourn in the city, which, she said, would be brief, due to affairs at Hedgewood Manor requiring her early attention. Mistress Clarissa would not reply to queries as to when she would set the date for her marriage to Sir Ronald Grandison IV, waiting five years to be announced. Eight separate receptions have been announced in her honor. We can only wish Lord Percival and his son, Sir Ronald, all good wishes for their success in obtaining the young lady's signature upon a marriage contract, which would, of course, once and for all time unite in common estate the long-rival holdings of Hedgewood Manor and Briarmoor.

Benjamin carefully folded the sheet and placed it in the small hobnailed chest holding his treasured, ill-fated works of fiction. He was so shaken by the column that he found work impossible. He left the garret and walked the streets sullenly for hours. The Thames was gray and putrid, sloshing noisily against retaining walls and mucky banks.

The specter had not come again since he began the work. No more sighs and whispering moans of "Jason—Jason." Often Benjamin felt that she was close, but holding herself away in fear of disturbing him. She became more real to him as the work progressed, her purpose becoming apparent: a terrible longing for revenge that surmounted even the great defeat, death. Why she had chosen him as her instrument, he could not say, nor did he care. But the young woman mentioned in the tabloid today would most certainly be concerned about the whys, as would her uncle, Lord Pereival Grandison. Benjamin felt as if he had taken the proverbial tiger by the tail; he certainly could not let go. A certain guilt disturbed him. He was playing God, tampering with well-ordered lives innocent of blame. He had come to believe implicitly in the truth of his narrative, with the total faith that any author must have in his work. That the debt for an ancient wrong should fall on the innocent descendants seemed grossly unfair. Yet, had not the Bible said that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children?

All that afternoon Benjamin could not shake from his mind the image of a young woman of breeding, perhaps this moment in lace and tulle at some regal soiree, happily unaware that he, Benjamin Thorn, held in his hand the

reputation of her family. Or was this Clarissa Grandison mentioned in the tabloid a witch, whose shade crossed the countryside to hound him for some diabolical purposc as yet unknown to him? —Late that evening he stoically returned to his work.

Within three months the book was complete. Benjamin had lost perhaps fifteen pounds. Ill with a stubborn lung congestion, he walked five miles to the more dignified business district of London, and, wheezing and coughing, bearded the printer Angus MacKenna in his murky, cluttered den.

"Aye, here ya are again, lad," MacKenna scowled, keeping his milk-white, freckled hands busy at turning the pages of a tiny, freshly printed book of sonnets. "Thomas Gray, with a true and burnin' talent," he remarked pointedly. "Another effort, is't? Will ya never give it up?"

The man was middle-aged and brawny. He wore a flaxen wig that was no help in the offensive against his bristling, thick brackish-colored hair, which continually pushed the headpiece up and awry, creating a ludicrous picture of a man ever in keeping with the times. If wigs were the fashion, MacKenna would wear them. He did, and managed to look thoroughly ridiculous. But the same awarcness of the times served the man well in his trade, that of printing what the growing reading public wanted to read. He managed, somehow, to convince the readers that he had printed what they wanted to read, even if initial public apathy proved the contrary. The man was due some respect, despite his vulgar, bourgeois taste in literature; he made money, and that was what he was in business to do.

Benjamin coughed against his fist, standing miserably fevered and uncomfortable before another of his tormentors. "This work—I think you'll find . . . this new work different from the others you've rejected, Master MacKenna."

"Given time ta think again, might ya not be exaggeratin' a bit, eh?"

"I—only said *different*, not better, or more to your liking, sir."

MacKenna turned fiercely blue eyes on Benjamin, a look of pitying tolerance on his face. "I do not like ta say it, lad, but you're a man o' little or no talent for the writin' o' popular fiction."

Benjamin sneezed violently and struggled for a kerchief hidden deep in the pocket of his breeches. He blew his nose, wiped the soiled rag over the raw and burning

protuberance, then said patiently, "If you would just glance at it. Actually, it *is* fiction, but not apparently . . ."

"Not—*apparently*? And what would ya be meanin' by that?"

Benjamin stepped forward awkwardly and shoved the ribbon-tied pages toward the printer. "A glance at it, Master MacKenna—please?"

Angus MacKenna twisted his limp mouth and shrugged. He took up the manuscript and dropped it carelessly before him on the cluttered table, glancing sourly at the title page which served as the cover, for Benjamin lacked funds to purchase heavy colored paper or leather. MacKenna's blue eyes flashed up to Benjamin, a new and cold light in them.

"What do ya think ta accomplish by the changin' o' your name?"

"It appeared a good idea, considering the text, to—ah, disguise my identity—for the sake of sensationalism, uh . . . hoping for varied conjectures by my readers. . . ."

"Your readers!" MacKenna exclaimed savagely.

"I have high hopes for this work, sir."

"Do ya now," the man muttered, turning the page to scan the opening paragraphs that were just as they had been set to paper that first night of surrender. He snapped his head around to say bitingly, "My good lad, how many times must I tell ya ta write so I could read what you're tryin' ta say? Your handwritin' is here like it was when ya first come ta me with your work, a cruelty to the eyes of a man."

"I was most anxious to deposit it with you . . . I . . . I didn't take the time to copy it meticulously."

"True, it has a freshness about it. I'll give it a readin'. Now, if you'll be leavin' me ta my occupation . . . ?"

Benjamin stepped back, but followed an impulse and said quickly, "I worked very hard, with much hope—you will read it?"

"Ya *all* work hard, lad—you're all without a lick of sense as well. Go on, get ya out of here . . . I work a bit m'self, believe it or not."

For three days Benjamin lay abed, his congestion far the better of his will to resist it. He was utterly spent, drained of blood and marrow, sick not so much from congestive lungs but from a deep, nagging prediction of failure. The gibberish of a lunatic scrawled out for MacKenna to recognize quickly as just that. Jason's presenta-

tion had been too stilted, overly simple, almost formless, without rhythm or tone, a colorless reportage of rather trivial incidents. The conflict and story line were so shop-worn as to be called clichés. It was, essentially, a piece of fiction, in the form of an autobiography. There was no hope now for anything save Hellgate, prison for the insane. He enjoyed a delicious self-pity the entire three days.

On the fourth day, shortly after twelve noon, a hesitant tapping roused Benjamin from a doze.

"Who is it?" he queried weakly.

"H'its Jamie 'ere, sir—from MacKenna; 'ee sent you a message, tell me ta bring it quick like."

"For God's sake, come in," Benjamin cried, swinging his legs out of bed.

The lad stuck his grimy head in, then the rest of his ragged self followed.

"Well, where is it, quickly?" Benjamin shouted, waving an outstretched hand.

"H'its in me 'ead, sir. MacKenna, 'ee says you're ta come ta 'is shop, and this minute; you're not to waste no time, 'ee says. Coo, 'ee was 'ead up something fierce, thought 'ee would bite me 'ead off, I did, when I dallied some. And 'ee tossed me a shilling fer the runnin'. Now, when 'ee tosses shillings about, h'its—"

"All right," Benjamin interrupted roughly. "Sorry I don't have any shillings to toss. I'll owe you. Now get you gone, like a good lad."

The lad scurried away, leaving the door wide open. But Benjamin was in no mood to concern himself with the proprieties. He hauled on hose and breeches with quaking hands. His stomach was a deep hollow, his belt holding loose, his breeches hanging preposterously in the seat. He hastily plastered his matted hair back and tied it fast at the nape of his neck. Dumping his three-cornered hat on his head, he was off. MacKenna was impressed—to the point of tossing shillings at a street urchin. Whether for or against the work, it mattered little. Benjamin had stirred apathy into a storm. He had stirred MacKenna, and nothing else mattered in that long, arduous trek to MacKenna's location.

When he entered the moldy shop, he was fairly attacked by the Scotsman, hauled by an arm into a cubicle the size of a large tomb and just as gloomy, pushed into a horse-hair upholstered chair. A pinlike hair stabbed him in the bottom when he sat down heavily, and Benjamin reared up, flushing and excusing himself.

"What do I care for your pains, lad?" MacKenna bel-

lowed, pacing the stuffy, dark office. "I would have ya tell me where ya got the material from which ya copied your submission."

"Copied?" Benjamin asked in an unnatural voice.

"Aye—copied. And do not try ta deceive me."

"I copied no documents of any kind, Master MacKenna. Nor did I research the subject. It is purely a work of creative fiction. Imagination."

"Damn ya ta hell, but ya lie ta me with your face so shinin' innocent."

Benjamin sucked in a rasping breath and swallowed a cough. In a strained voice, he asked, "Did you like the work, or did you not?"

MacKenna threw his great arms over his head, unsettling his wig to a more ridiculous angle, "'Course I liked it. Would I be sendin' for ya if I did not? But I cannot print in a book what could have my name before the magistrate on a charge o' slander."

Hungry for vengeance, Benjamin said coyly, "It struck you as believable, I see—and popular, which I have no talent for." He deliberately affected MacKenna's thick brogue.

"Do not sass me, lad—I warn ya. I cannot see how ya hit so close ta the truth without a bit o' studyin' o' the history, which I took the liberty o' doin' myself. And ta use the Grandison name were a fool thing to do. When I print it, it will be with a changed name . . ."

"You'll print it!" Benjamin fairly screamed, bounding out of his chair, his face cracking into a broad smile of triumph.

"Aye, and I give ya fair warnin': expect a bit o' trouble. I see a bonny profit and I mean ta turn it my way—and yours—but the names . . ."

"The name Jason Darby won't be changed," Benjamin said emphatically.

MacKenna halted in his pacing to glare at Benjamin. "You're giving orders, are ya—already?"

"And her name remains Clarissa; give her any surname you wish. Jason Darby is the name of the author, unchanged. I have no other demands. But one question. The percentage I am to receive?"

MacKenna dropped his chin and squinted his eyes. "Ten."

"Twenty-five," Benjamin contradicted brazenly.

"Twelve—and not a hapenny more."

"Fifteen," Benjamin insisted, smiling. "And a written

contract in the hand of a barrister, witnessed. I see a bonny profit and I mean ta turn it my way."

MacKenna almost laughed. He eyed Benjamin with a close scrutiny. It could be that the lad had found an ancient diary, or someone might have given him the story to tell, he being a person of no talent and not able to create it for himself. "Do ya swear ta me: you're the only man with a right ta the royalties—do ya now?"

"The only man," Benjamin said, feeling a slight qualm. There was, again, no explaining Jason. MacKenna's hint that he had copied from something disturbed him a little, but he was too happy to dwell on it.

"Then it will be printed as ya wrote it. Jason Darby: An Autobiography, by Jason Darby."

With that, Angus MacKenna took himself to a wall cupboard, and from a small, mahogany casket, which he unlocked with an ornate key, he extracted a packet of twenty-five one-pound notes. He returned to Benjamin and, in far more friendly tones, said, "Here ya are. I would put a bit o' food inta your stomach. And get yourself a fitting lodging for a man o' letters."

Awed, Benjamin took the packet of notes, staring at them. His hand made a tight fist around the packet, and he made a silent vow: to turn this twenty-five pounds into fifty, and that into one hundred, until— Beyond that he had no specific plan. Somewhere there stood a manor house by the sea. That house was at the end of the path.

In his new quarters on Threadneedle Street, Benjamin stood at the window of his sitting room, a knee on the window seat. He held back the heavy drapes with one hand so that he could watch the rabble in the street one story below. The tiny panes of glass were quite transparent, in day hours allowing in a satisfying light that dispensed with the better part of the gloom. A bonfire burned just down the street, across from the gin shop. Children ran from the alleys, dragging cats by their tails, tossing the yowling beasts into the flames. It was All Hallow's Eve once again. A year, he thought—how swiftly the time had passed, how remarkably his condition had altered. He turned to inspect the room. It was not grand, to be sure, but a minimum of verminous guests companioned him and it was clean and comfortable. The old hardwood cabinets and tables were oiled to a gleaming finish, not too badly scratched or pocked. His mattress was stuffed with cotton. And it cost but a pittance more

than the garret. Outside the door, over the bell chain, hung a placard with the name Benjamin Thorn imprinted on it—a gift from MacKenna by way of acknowledgment, if not admiration; recognition of himself as a man of published letters, whether he had the talent for it or not.

A street clock clanged nine bells, and the Crier's voice could barely be heard over the din in the streets. Benjamin stepped to his writing table, lighted by an oil lamp set in one corner. He picked up a sheet of fine paper, reading over what he had written earlier in the day. MacKenna had insisted he begin another exposé, which, he generously allowed, was Benjamin's particular forte; "talent." But Benjamin had no interest in exhuming skeletons from closets. Let them lie and be forgotten. If he had known the full story, he would not have begun the autobiography, assuming of course that he could have kept Jason back after once giving him sway. Since publication of the book, though, a kind of peace had descended on Benjamin. The specter of the sighs had vanished, as if she had never existed. But he had little confidence in the hope that he had imagined her. At any moment he expected to hear her whisper behind him again, "Jason—Jason." Tonight was the night for it, to be sure.

No longer hungry or defeated, Benjamin felt himself to be as sane as the next man. Many months of introspection, plus the success of his work, had manifested in a growing confidence in himself. Vagrant emotions and visions, of course, continued to lurk within his mind—Jason, after all, had been with him all his life—but to rationalize the situation constantly only worsened it. Benjamin still did not believe in ghosts, yet he could not bring himself entirely to dismiss that ethereal presence, gone now, as purely the product of madness; her reality was as true as his own hand before his eye this moment. Actually, he preferred not to think about her, for when he did he was forced to ponder concepts abhorrent to him in every sense.

The bell outside the door clanged sharply, a hideous, demonic yowl setting the rafters shivering. Benjamin lurched erect, his heart slamming against his ribs.

"Ben-ja-min Thorrrrrnnn . . ." a chilling voice called.

Benjamin shook his head in exasperation, moving to haul the door open. He faced a group of five goblins in lopsided masks and ragged costumes.

"Boo!" Radcliff Brandon shouted, lifting his arms to descend on Benjamin, who pretended horror and backed

into the room. Radcliff wore a grizzly corpse mask and held a keg of gin in each hand.

"If you had left the mask off," Benjamin grinned, "you would have frightened me more."

Radcliff set the kegs on a cabinet top and ripped the mask from his flushed face. "I completely misled you, admit it," he smirked. "Why, your knees can barely hold you, lad. Christ! how you are trembling in dread. . . ."

Two women and two men likewise removed their face masks, giggling like schoolchildren, all well on their way to oblivion. Radcliff introduced his companions one by one, with so thick a tongue that Benjamin caught not a single name. The women were common streetwalkers, each with two shades of hair, gray at the roots and brassy yellow at the straggly ends.

Radcliff threw an arm around Benjamin's shoulder and leaned close to say confidentially, "We thought to find us a bit of a witch or goblin, and came on these two bags instead. They look a bit like witches, at that. They're proper bitches— By jove! that rhymes. I'm a poet. Georgie! I'm a poet." He was away, roughly pounding on a companion's back, then swallowing gin from the now open keg offered to him.

His mouth twisting impatiently, Benjamin moved to a chair and fell into it. Radcliff brought him the keg and he took a good swallow of the stuff, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

"To what do I owe this honor?" Benjamin asked tightly. "I really could have suffered out my loneliness, Radcliff, not meaning to sound rude."

Radcliff dropped down on the window seat behind Benjamin. "I must say," he drawled, "you're a sly one, old chap . . . a bit of a fox, for all your appearance of boyish naïveté."

Benjamin turned in the chair, studying the man curiously. "Are you making any sense, or am I simply dull tonight?"

"Hah—don't try to innocent me, my lad; I've known you too long. You bluffed me for two months. Now I'm on to you. And I thought we were friends."

"Ah, we are indeed friends," Benjamin said patiently, resting his chin on the back of the chair. Behind him the women were shrieking happily as Radcliff's companions poked fingers into their bosoms and bottoms. "Have I kept something from you, Radcliff?"

From the pocket of his cloak, Radcliff clumsily extracted a thin, red book, tossing it in Benjamin's direction.

Benjamin caught the book and smiled. "Ah, the autobiography of Jason Darby. You have shoddy taste in literature, I must say."

"You wrote it!" Radcliff accused, shaking a forefinger in Benjamin's bland face.

Benjamin let no emotion show on his face, keeping his smile steady. "A fact that I have gone to great lengths to keep quiet. How did you discover this world-shaking truth, if I may ask?"

"I thought you were at last getting a bit of jolly-good sense into your head, damned well believed you about getting an increase in your trust due to—well, some blasted interest thing or another . . . living a bit better because of it." He got up and moved around to face Benjamin, glaring down at him. "I ask you now: why did you lie to me? Mel Your friend."

"Did you like the book?" Benjamin asked pleasantly.

"I should say I did—a cracking good piece of writing. If the source who filled my eager ear as to your authorship hadn't been so reliable, I tell you the truth, I wouldn't have believed you wrote it."

"Thank you." Benjamin laughed.

Radcliff moved to sit down on the floor at Benjamin's feet, holding the keg between his knees. "Tell me, between you and me, how in the name of the Holy Ghost did you get hold of the facts? I'd say jolly well half of London has read it by now, and there's those that say the Cartwright name is a flimsy disguise for Grandison, and I'd say that's damned well obvious. The rumors have it that there's not been a Darby in those parts, not a *true* Darby, since—"

"Sixteen ninety-nine," Benjamin put in helpfully. "And it's far more than rumor: a fact."

"Sixteen ninety-nine," Radcliff echoed dully. "A blasted mystery to me, how you got hold of the history of the Darbys, that being a dead line for so long, nobody remembering that . . ."

"Oh, but someone *always* remembers," Benjamin said, still smiling with paternal patience at his tipsy friend.

"I say, that was a curious remark." Radcliff eyed Benjamin carefully, frowning; then he said, in disbelief, "Could you be hiding the fact that you're a Darby, in part or whole, or . . .?"

Benjamin laughed, throwing his head back. "Go back to the year of Christ, and you'll find nothing but peasants, bakers, and weavers in my lineage. No, Radcliff, I am *not* a Darby."

As these last words left Benjamin's mouth, the door, not

tightly latched, crashed open on a blast of wind. The two women shrieked; then a hollow silence fell on the entire group.

Benjamin leaped to his feet, nearly upsetting Radcliff where he sat. She had come back, and in a *rage*.

"Ja-son," she fairly shrieked in protest, but against what?

"By jove!" Radcliff gasped, stumbling to his feet. "What the deuce was that?"

The candles were snuffed out. Only the one lamp on Benjamin's writing desk burned, casting weird shadows on the walls and ceiling. One shadow was not stable, but flung itself along the door wall toward Benjamin.

"I say, is this some kind of filthy joke!" Radcliff asked weakly, eyes fixed on the disturbed configuration.

Benjamin had gathered his emotions together. Reassured by the fact that others saw what he saw, he calmly sat back in his chair.

"What were you saying, Radcliff? Don't let her bother you. She's my familiar. All sorcerers have them, you know, and this is All Hallow's Eve."

"Well!" Radcliff exclaimed, his rounded eyes fixed on the now more stable shadow, "either I'm jolly good and drunk, or you're giving me a fact. If it's a trick you're playing, it's a whopper, a Royal Crown whopper. A sorcerer, indeed."

Cold air swirled in the room like sighing winds. The women whimpered and asked to leave.

"Georgie," Radcliff shouted over his shoulder. "Take the birds to a nest, that's a good chap. I have never met a true enough ghost. Methinks to stay here a bit and get acquainted. A fitting entertainment on the witches' night, wouldn't you say?"

He received no response from Georgie and the others, who hastily accepted the invitation to depart.

"Benjy?" Radcliff whispered, glancing at the window behind Benjamin's chair, where two candle flames seemed reflected like burning eyes. "Benjy—are you serious? Are you familiar with a true-enough specter?"

"Of course not," Benjamin laughed easily. "It's the night and all its portent, the gin in your gut. Would you believe me if I said yes?"

"I might, old chap—you're not the most pious man I know. You could be a bit mad, playing with the Devil."

"Thank you, again, dear friend."

Radcliff's glance slid again to the window. "Curse me, but I feel as though eyes are on us."

"God ever watches from above."

"Rot! Fairly strutting, you are, blasted cocksure and superior . . . Which reminds me of the book. Why the secret? I thought you to be seeking fame as well as fortune."

"I didn't write the book, so how can I take the credit?"

Radcliff's mouth fell open. He shut it, swallowed, and said, "Then MacKenna's journeyman is a liar, or it—that specter—whatever it is—wrote it, if you didn't. Damn you, you baffle me . . . you always confuse me. By jove, you're crazy all right, and nothing for it but to lock you up. Benjy, speak to me with one word of truth. Why did you keep it a secret?"

"All right," Benjamin said agreeably, "I'll tell you. I used the pen-name of Jason Darby for effect, to make the fiction seem nonfiction, creating thereby an air of authenticity. It's pure coincidence that there was a Darby line in Yorkshire."

"Coincidence!" Radcliff fairly shrieked. "A dozen coincidences, one after another? Really, you can do better than that, old chap. The manor in Yorkshire: that, too, just a bit of a coincidence? The very date of his death! Why you bothered to change the name of Grandison escapes me."

"Radcliff," Benjamin said seriously, leaning forward in his chair. "No one really understands the creative process. No author can for a fact say that he wholly created the illusions that spilled from his pen, because so much does seem to flow mysteriously without conscious direction. We sit back, awed, sometimes, at what we've said, at the curious reality in our people and places. I simply can't explain how so many realities appeared in the work, how I could know so much about Jason Darby."

Radcliff thought hard on this, considerably sobered. Glancing at the haunted window, he saw that the strange glow was still there. "Could that," he said huskily, "be Jason Darby?"

Benjamin turned. He met the fiery eyes squarely. "Go away," he said in a commanding tone of voice.

"Blimey! You talk to it?"

"To what, Radcliff?"

"To that—that thing!"

"I was talking to you, my friend. I want to go to bed, and you are keeping me up."

"Blasted rude of you to say so."

"Blasted rude of you to barge in uninvited."

"You can't manage to keep your authorship a secret much longer."

"No, I expect not."

"Lord Percival Grandison holds a seat in the House of Lords. You'll find yourself on a magistrate's bench, a noose in the offing. For that kind of slander, two days and you're hanging, a holiday crowd cursing your name as you die."

"How can I be convicted of slandering a man long, long dead? I believe Sir Ronald Grandison III passed away some twenty years ago, of old age. He is the man who would have to stand in accusation."

"You named him a murderer, a cold-hearted killer, and not right in the head to boot, besides insinuating that he lusted after his half-sister. Incest. Murder. If you think Lord Percival Grandison will stand still for—"

"I don't *think* about it at all," Benjamin said sharply. "But if you wag your tongue to every slut you pick up on a street corner as to the fact of my authorship, I might have to start dwelling on the hangman's noose."

Benjamin rose to his feet and walked to the door. "Good night, Radcliff, it was jolly good seeing you. Happy witch-hunting."

Radcliff sourly took the broad hint. In the dark hall, he turned and said begrudgingly, "I must say, old man, it's whopping good reading, whether fact or fiction. To think, that rotter getting away with murder, when boys of ten and twelve are hung for stealing tuppence. Life can be damned inequitable. An eye for an eye, but some get a fortune as a prize for their evil doings."

"It will all even out in the end," Benjamin said without thinking, startled by the vehemence with which he had spoken. He closed the door with unintended abruptness, right in Radcliff's face.

Benjamin turned to face the window. "Good to have you back, Clarissa," he said good-naturedly.

It would serve no purpose to tremble each time she appeared. Since she insisted on hounding him, he might as well be civilized about it. Anyway, he knew her far better now. He knew her greatest happiness and her deepest sorrow of those days when she had been young and beautiful. She was the spirit of a human being, no more evil in this state than while she lived. What he did not know was what happened to her following Jason's death. In that, there was another tale. One day, perhaps, he would tell that story, if he ever learned her fate. For now

he could only pity her, if this was the Clarissa of Jason's heart, as he assumed her to be. Damn him, she was real enough, if five others saw her.

◆ CHAPTER THREE ◆

When Benjamin returned from the greengrocer's at midday on the Friday following All Hallow's Eve, awaiting him outside the door of his rooms was a gentleman's gentleman, with a lace kerchief to his nose, a man obviously long-removed from the low levels of society. He stood held in, as if he dared not move for fear of soiling himself.

"Could I be of help to you?" Benjamin asked, when the sniffling person blocked his intention to unlock the door. Benjamin juggled the wicker basket of vegetables in his arms and waited.

"Yes," the person said thickly, "if you are Master Benjamin Thorn." He said the name as if speaking an obscenity.

"I believe I can truthfully say that is my name," Benjamin said sarcastically, coldly meeting the man's squinting eyes.

A small, light blue envelope appeared, held between a dainty thumb and forefinger. When Benjamin had awkwardly taken it with the hand still gripping the latchkey, the person bowed slightly and made a stiff, hasty retreat toward the staircase. Inside his lodgings, Benjamin quickly deposited his burden in the pantry, a closet inset off the sitting room. He broke open the seal and was somewhat taken aback by the contents.

Mistress Clarissa Grandison requested his presence at Briarmoor Town House at two of the clock on the afternoon of Saturday next, 3rd November, on a matter of grave importance. That was tomorrow. He was both surprised and not surprised. Some reaction from the Grandison family had been more or less inevitable; both he and MacKenna were aware from the beginning of the more unpleasant possibilities. Obviously Radcliff was not alone in knowing the identity of the author. Blast it! The entire city probably knew. The worst was now to come. In his account with the Bank of England rested the better por-

tion of the publication's earnings, some three thousand pounds. The book was selling well in shops as far away as Glasgow and Paris, and in some volume in the boroughs and villages. Anyone who could read seemed willing to give good money for a peep into the closet of a noble house. Speculation doubtless ran high; the Grandison clan must clearly be the favorite in the wagering. Arguments probably raged as to who had written the work and was hiding behind a brazen obscurity. Some, Benjamin knew, swore the work to be an authentic document raised from some forgotten tomb by wily Angus MacKenna and turned to the Scotsman's profit. The elements of mystery were good for sales, which was probably the best reason MacKenna had for the attempt to keep the author's identity secret.

Benjamin considered ignoring the summons from Mistress Grandison, then thought better of it. The truth was, he could not think of any person he more eagerly anticipated meeting than the lady in question. Thus, after swallowing a hasty lunch, he took himself first to the bank, withdrawing fifty pounds of his precious cache, and then to a clothier. He purchased a white linen shirt with lace ruffles at throat and wrist, fine hose, shoes with elegant buckles, and a modestly priced suit. Next, a flowing, ankle-length cloak with a beaver collar, and a lace kerchief to hold in his hand. He had kept faith with his bourgeois taste by choosing colors of gray and brown. Violets, reds, and blues offended him, causing him to feel like a signpost shouting to be seen. He wished to remain as inconspicuous as possible while at the same time managing to look well fixed and in fashion. The large parcel of finery under his arm, he hurried back to his rooms, where he sat down to reread the autobiography, refreshing his memory on the lesser details. He went to bed early, thinking a long night's sleep would serve him well in freshness of spirit and astuteness for what he must meet and prevail against on the morrow.

Benjamin hired a coach, arriving before Briarmoor Town House at half past one. With half an hour on his hands, he strolled aimlessly, following a neatly clipped high hedge, peering through where there were gaps, or a gate, to catch a glimpse of the stately edifice. He was very nervous and much inclined to turn heel and run. The Town House was Elizabethan. In the reign of the Virgin Queen, architects and house-builders had tried their best

to capture something of the classical Italian fashion, but they had failed for the most part, producing a hodgepodge of square-headed doors and windows, with the wide expanses of windows concentrated on the upper stories, causing the structures to appear top-heavy, about to fall. Chimneys, because of the climate of Italy, were not accounted for in the classical design. And Briarmoor Town House had not received a happy solution to the problem of its jutting chimneys, pilasters, wreaths, urns, and statuary tacked on here and there with no appreciation for the overall effect—which was indeed unharmonious.

When a nearby street clock clanged the hour of two, Benjamin straightened his shoulders and purposefully stepped forward to give the liveried gateman his letter of summons. The man didn't speak but pulled a bell cord that brought an immediate response. A young servant girl appeared from around an evergreen shrub at the side of the house. She halted, glaring at Benjamin through the metal bars of the gate. The gate was opened and she beckoned Benjamin to follow her. She led him along a graveled path, past stretches of lawn where iron benches circled the trunks of winter-barren trees. The carriage house was visible as the path turned; a dozen ornate coaches stood in the driveway. As Benjamin approached the main entrance of the house, music could be heard, and a hum as of a social gathering in sway. The servant girl stepped aside to allow him through the door, saying, "William will announce you, sir, if you'll just wait 'ere, please."

William turned out to be that same long-nosed fellow who had lowered himself to entering Threadneedle Street. "This way, if you please," the man said in a stuffy manner. "Keep your step on the runner; spare the carpeting."

The house was almost bizarre in its over-elegance, with profuse amounts of tapestry hangings, carved wooden paneling, globular plasterwork on the ceiling, friezes, and life-sized portraits of Grandsons everywhere space allowed. William opened the paneled door and gestured with his arm. "If you will wait in the sitting room, please."

Benjamin stepped inside and the door closed behind him. A fire burned in a stone fireplace across the large, splendidly furnished room. Heavy velvet drapes covered the windows so that the room was deeply shadowed; it was badly lighted by a crystal chandelier holding several dozen burning candles. The chandelier was charmingly old-world, but oil lamps would have given better light with

far less a fire hazard, and with no wax to drip on the plush Oriental carpets.

The sound of a latch turning brought Benjamin to abrupt attention. He swung around and his eyes widened in surprise. He knew her. Her face was as familiar to him as his own.

"Master Thorn," Clarissa Grandison said haughtily, as she moved smoothly toward him with a rustle of satin and lace. She offered her gloved hand, her face devoid of expression.

Still dumbfounded, Benjamin could only stare at her, as he tried to recall where he had known her, and when. Her hair was the red of flame, with golden highlights, her eyes green as Irish hillsides. She had very fine features—an exquisitely beautiful young woman of about twenty-one years, not the type of woman one would easily forget once having seen her.

"You stare," she said flatly, letting her hand drop to her side.

"Forgive me," he muttered, flushing. "but I feel so certain that I have known you in the past . . . somewhere . . ."

"No, Master Thorn, that is quite impossible."

"Of course," he said quickly. Her tone had said, "How could such as I have known such as you?" She was thoroughly a noblewoman, born aware of her superiority. She did not appear overcome with herself; rather, so finely bred as to be entirely unconscious of her pretentiousness and insolence.

"Do sit down," she said, gesturing toward a wine-colored velvet divan near the fire. When he had seated himself on the edge of the cushion, his hands tightly clasped in his lap, she stepped to the stone wall of the fireplace and from the wide, handsomely carved mantel took up a copy of the autobiography.

Benjamin's heart hesitated in his chest. As he watched her, he thought to see the specter of the sighs like a colorful aura surrounding her. The timbre of her voice was even the same; she was in every aspect the image he had held of Jason's Clarissa, of the hounding ghost.

"My fiancé, Sir Ronald Grandison," she began tightly, moving to stand directly before him, "paid a certain printer the sum of seventy pounds to learn the name of the writer of this book, Master Thorn."

Benjamin met her eyes confidently and said, "Offered sufficient money, Master MacKenna would sell the soul of his mother to the Devil."

"Yes, there *are* such men. Do you feel somewhat the same about money, Master Thorn?"

"I cherish it highly, Mistress. One must first have none at all, to appreciate truly the value of money."

"But would you sell the soul of your mother for a sum?" Her green eyes were bright now, her anger held back with difficulty.

"I hardly think so. But one never knows what one might do under dire circumstance."

"I do not like this book," she snapped, scowling down at him.

"I am sorry."

"It is fiction of the worst sort, a simply appalling display of presumptuous twisting of facts."

"Indeed? Pray tell me what facts I so nefariously twisted."

"If you do not know, what *right* had you in printing this . . . this . . ."

"I did have the facts, and I think you are well aware that I wrote truth. Lies can easily be disproved with facts, but fact has a way of sticking in the craw, and only loud denials come from those helpless to prove falsehood in a court of law. If I slandered your family and you could prove me a liar, I am quite certain I would this moment be in the dock and not in your very comfortable sitting room."

She sucked in a breath and whirled around to slam the book back on the mantel. Furiously pulling at the fingers of her white lace gloves, she kept her back to him. She turned at last, holding the two gloves in one hand, snapping them nervously against the palm of her other hand.

"Sir, you are an upstart and a rascal!"

"I am a writer, Mistress Grandison—for profit."

"A contemptible extortionist," she exclaimed, losing control. "How much do you want for the documents? If she confided in you before her death, you must have realized that she was not in—" Her words broke off, as if she had not meant to say so much. "She was not well, Master Thorn. Those documents are—"

"Forgive me," Benjamin interrupted, "but I have no documents."

"You will not sell them?" she gasped. "What have you in mind, in the name of God—what is your foul game? What more can you do to us than you have done already?"

Benjamin eyed her exasperatedly. "I have only the original manuscript, from which MacKenna printed the book."

She flung her long curls back from her shoulders with a jerk of her head, her gardenia skin flushing. "Master Thorn," she said emotionally, "I can prove that you copied at least one portion of your book, though how you managed to get your hands on it, when I have had it under lock and key at Hedgewood Manor for six years, is beyond me." She reached into her bodice and from between the rounds of her ample bosom brought forth a ragged, multifolded, age-scorched paper. She moved to him and offered it, with the comment, "Jason Darby wrote this in the summer of 1696. Amateurish, to be sure—he was not a poet—but conclusive evidence, you will have to agree. Please read it."

Benjamin apprehensively took the article put to him, carefully peeling open the crumbling paper. What first struck him was the nearly unreadable, scrawling hand. It was so familiar. He held his breath as he read.

Over misty moors and heaths we ran
Sweet Clarissa and this unworthy man.
As summer wind through blossomed boughs
The cries from her lips were wondrous vows,
That I, enslaved forever, lovingly returned,
Swearing a love for her that would forever burn.
If I died tomorrow and to Heaven ascended
I would forswear death and to Clarissa descend
My soul fair desolate in Heaven above
Without her, my Clarissa, my sweetest love.
Clarissa, my heart, whom I will ever love.

"Word for word," Mistress Grandison said triumphantly, as Benjamin's stricken eyes flashed up to meet hers. "Your face shows your guilt. Now, if you will cease this toying, so that we might settle this matter between us . . . I *must* have those documents."

"Where did you get this?" Benjamin asked huskily. "Surely you copied it from my book and expertly aged the paper, for what purpose I cannot imagine—but it cannot be genuine."

"Ridiculous!" she cried, infuriated.

He shook his head hard in denial. "So help me God, I did not copy this poem. I simply somehow . . . duplicated the blasted thing." How could he tell her he thought a part of himself called Jason wrote the book. She would consider him insane, and with no little justification. "A rather miraculous . . . coincidence," he said feebly.

"The only miracle," she snapped, "is that you have not

been drawn and quartered long before this. I have never met a scoundrel with such a bent for theatics. It would be far simpler for both of us if you would name your price."

"All right!" Benjamin exclaimed. "Say I have certain documents, from which I copied to form the text of my book—"

"Yes—do let's say that," she said, smiling icily, moving to sit on the divan across from him.

"It would be far more to my advantage to keep them."

"Ah?"

"Once they're out of my hands, I could no longer substantiate the claims made in the book. Finding myself up a creek without a paddle, I would be facing a magistrate with no defense whatsoever, and ultimately in the extremely uncomfortable position of having my innards burned before my eyes just previous to my being hung."

"Are you suggesting that a Grandison would—"

"I am suggesting that you have admitted, by a frantic desire to purchase those documents, the fact that a Grandison committed murder some eighty years ago. I am not one to say that blood will out, but neither would I like to wager against the possibility that the insanity of the father has been visited on the sons."

"Master Thorn!" she cried, rising to her feet. "I warn you. Either release the documents to me for a price, or you may find yourself paying dearly for your insolence."

Her eyes were like flames, searing into him. He shivered and rose to his feet. Standing before her, he could not speak for the bitterness he felt, as if someone he had loved dearly had suddenly turned on him, stabbing him with a hatred he had not known she harbored.

"Get out," she hissed suddenly, brandishing a satin-covered arm toward the door. "May your soul burn in hell for what you have done against the name of the finest woman who ever lived on the face of this earth."

"Did you *know* Clarissa Darby?" Benjamin asked in amazement.

"Know her!" she spat out. "Will you please leave."

"But—you're so young. How could you have known the woman?" He stubbornly hung back, hungry for answers.

She sprang into motion, brushing past him. In an instant she had opened the door and was gone. He stood transfixed for a long moment, then turned to leave.

A man appeared in the doorway, blocking Benjamin's path. He was tall, with an angular, pouting face. His wig

was white and powdered, and he twirled a watch chain in a well-manicured hand.

"Ah, now we have the villain of the play," the man said. "Sir Ronald Grandison here. Can't say I am charmed to meet you, I fear."

Benjamin glared at him, hating him on sight. "And do you, also, accuse me of extortion, of harboring secret documents, sir?"

Sir Ronald rocked from foot to foot, smiling broadly. He was perhaps forty, protruding a bit around the belt, probably balding under the adorning hairpiece. He seemed uninterested in replying. No wonder, Benjamin thought, that Mistress Grandison had persisted in putting off the date of her marriage to this distant cousin; the man was a fop.

"My fiancée made no headway, I gather," Sir Ronald said at last.

"None at all, sir. The proposed documents will never fall into your hands—of that I can assure you."

"Ah, a man of firmness and courage; how endearing. A very interesting book, Master Thorn. But I fear grandfather is turning in his grave, not a bit pleased about all those beastly things you said about him."

"More than one corpse is turning in his grave, Sir Ronald."

"I say—how sinister. Are you a confidant of the Devil's cohorts, eh? The penalty is severe for those who walk in the fiend's footsteps."

"If you will be so kind as to let me pass," Benjamin said coldly, moving closer to his adversary.

Sir Ronald continued to block the door. "My father, Lord Percival, is most urgently inclined toward bringing you before the magistrate, my good man."

"He has my blessing. Now, will you please let me—"

"But Clarissa and I are strongly opposed to such action. My father is seventy years and two, not always clear in his thinking."

"I am most grateful to you, and to Mistress Clarissa."

"Oh, don't be. We could have far surer methods in mind, ways of calling an abrupt halt to your purpose, ways that would not call the entire commonwealth's attention to your despicable piece of literature. Any further notoriety we can certainly do without."

"Please," Benjamin insisted, "I would like to leave."

"By all means," Sir Ronald said, stepping aside and bowing, flourishing an arm. "Do consider yourself forewarned, won't you, that's a good fellow."

"I will indeed," Benjamin said over his shoulder, as he rushed away along the carpet runner.

He plunged outside into a chilling rain and walked all the way to Threadneedle Street, which consumed several hours, the remainder of the lighted day. He wished he had never written the blasted book. Three thousand pounds suddenly seemed hardly worth the ridiculous accumulation of threats that had descended on him today like omens of doom.

For a fortnight nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Benjamin received during that time another six hundred pounds from MacKenna, as his share of the continually rising profits on the book. MacKenna had printed signboards, and all over the city men carried them on their backs, crying the merits of Jason Darby's sensational autobiography.

On a Saturday, as Benjamin struggled with the narrative of his new novel, having forsaken the exposé he had begun several months ago, the bell clanged outside the door. He thought it was Radcliff again; his friend had been hounding him daily with pleas to show him the cursed, nonexistent secret documents. They were in his digs, Radcliff queried, were they not? Just a peep at them, for old time's sake—and why did he refuse to sell them to the highest bidder? Surely the Grandisons would pay dearly to have the lot—Benjamin should deal them out one at a time, raising the price with each transaction. Radcliff was an impossible bore, an incorrigible thief to the depths of his soul. The bell clanged again and Benjamin sighed in disgust, slamming his pen down. He went to the door to haul it open angrily. A strange, handsome gentleman lifted his beaver hat and said, "A good day to you."

Benjamin gaped a moment as he adjusted to the fact that it was not Radcliff. "Excuse me," he laughed, flushing, "but I was expecting a friend. I don't usually stare."

"Ah, then you have an appointment. I could come again another day."

"No, no, I had no appointment. He's a pest, really, has been dropping in every day—but do come in."

The man smiled pleasantly as he stepped inside. Obviously a gentleman, he did not, however, cringe from the humble, drab surroundings. He seemed perfectly at ease and not even slightly disdainful.

"I am Squire Edmund Masterson. And you are the illustrious Benjamin Thorn?"

"Illustrious? That is arguable." Benjamin smiled. "Benjamin Thorn is in fact my name."

"May I sit down?"

"Of course," Benjamin exclaimed, rushing to pull his best chair forward.

The man split the tails of his coat and sat down, leaning his elegant arms on the chair rests. "I have come to discuss your book, Master Thorn."

"Oh lord," Benjamin could not help groaning. "That book will be the ruin of me yet."

The man laughed deep in his throat. "I hardly think it will be the ruin of you, rather the opposite. I was most impressed with the work, most impressed. Not since Addison has literary work been characterized by such clarity and restraint."

"Do you think so?" Benjamin smiled wryly. "I assume, then, that you accepted the work as purely fictional."

The man's dark eyes darted up, and a curious light was in them that quickly vanished, replaced by a veil of caution. "Whether fiction or fact, the work has merit," he said carefully. "I have come to offer you my patronage. Being a man of wealth and a man with true appreciation of literature and art, I suffer the stigma of having no talent whatsoever for words, and, to my eternal regret, cannot draw a straight line—worse yet, I am color-blind. An exaggeration, of course, but I might as well be blind to color."

Benjamin laughed appreciatively. "You wish to become my patron, sir? I am astonished."

"I can introduce you into the best literary circles, to persons who could in many ways progress your career."

"I am very flattered," Benjamin said doubtfully.

"Do you have work in progress?"

"I do. But it is not going well at all."

"You must look to the future, toward your next publication and the one following that. To squander your new wealth in the time it will take to complete the new work would be a pity."

Benjamin thoughtfully moved toward his writing desk, to gaze down on the worthless pages spread there. "Late-ly," he said in a low voice, "I have felt less and less like writing. It's as though I said all that I had to say in the already published work."

"Not an unusual feeling. Quite ordinary after the first success. Will you allow me to be your patron?"

Benjamin turned and studied closely the man's almost

too pretty face. He wore no wig, his dark, waving hair falling loose on his shoulders. He was clean-shaven, except for a thin, rather reddish moustache.

"Do you live in London, sir?" Benjamin asked suspiciously.

"Yes. For three months, in winter."

"And during the remainder of the year?"

"At Withernsea Grange."

"Yorkshire?"

"Yorkshire, Master Thorn."

"Could you, by any chance, be acquainted with Mistress Clarissa Grandison?"

The man hesitated, as if considering whether to speak honestly or falsely. "I have had the honor of meeting the lady," he admitted.

"I see," Benjamin said hotly. "Then you might like to tell me the ulterior motive behind your generous offer of patronage."

Edmund Masterson smiled, meeting Benjamin's eyes squarely. "Must I have an ulterior motive, simply because I know Clarissa Grandison?"

"Until the contrary is proven to me, yes."

"I insist—my interest in you is purely as a lover of art."

"Please forgive me, but I can't accept your kind offer, sir. The coincidence is too much for me. You could not have deceived me for long, I would soon enough have—"

"My good man," Edmund Masterson interrupted. "How could I possibly do you harm in the capacity of patron? You are far too suspicious by nature, I must say, to so question the motives of every man you meet."

Benjamin sternly examined the man's face. "Sir," he said vehemently, "I will stake my life on it, that your motives are not all that you say they are. Quite frankly, the work you were so impressed with could not in any sense be considered characterized by restraint. It is an emotionally charged, rather excessively dramatic, certainly overly romantic outpouring. There, you have the author's critical analysis of his own work. At first, I was impressed with the uncluttered style, but I have since then had time to consider the work more objectively, coming to the conclusion that oversimplification was the only resource for a man of little literary aptitude. The rather sensational accusation at the end accounts for the large volume of sales; otherwise I doubt it would have sold two copies."

The Squire slowly rose to his feet, still smiling. "A rather astute observation," he said lightly. "Jason Darby was just such a man, I have heard. He filled endless reams

of paper in his short lifetime, never satisfied with anything he wrote. I doubt if a single publisher saw one of his efforts."

Benjamin stared at the man. "Was there some message for me in those remarks?" he asked, following the Squire as the man smoothly walked to the door.

"There, you see, you're at it again, suspicious of every word I say." One hand on the door latch, the gentleman reached into a small pocket of his waistcoat and brought forth an embossed card. "My card, Master Thorn. Do think it over, won't you? My offer remains open to you. Call on me at any time." He thought a moment, then added, "Curious, how an obscure man like Jason Darby could become renowned some eighty years after his death—and still not have offered *anything* of value to the world."

Benjamin sucked in his breath, a blind rage washing over him. Then suddenly he felt her near; cold winds blowing against him, swirling, hissing breaths.

"Get out!" Benjamin exploded, shoving the man aside and jerking open the door.

The Squire at last dropped his perpetual smile. "Sir, you act as though I have insulted you personally."

Suddenly the door sprang from Benjamin's hand and slammed closed in Edmund Masterson's face, almost catching the gentleman's leg.

Shaking, Benjamin stumbled back and fell into a chair. Around and around him she writhed, in a frenzy of disturbed emotions. Her power seemed to increase in her fury, and small objects plummeted across the room, slamming against the walls—a book, his pen, a small figurine.

Benjamin dropped his head into his hands and groaned, "Why don't you go to your grave, Clarissa, and rest—then we would both be at peace."

She immediately calmed. A cool touch on his hand, as if to reassure him of her good intentions, and she was gone.

◆ CHAPTER FOUR ◆

On the tenth of December, at five o'clock, Benjamin kept a scheduled appointment with Angus MacKenna to discuss the fifth printing of the autobiography and an

increase in his royalty percentage. It had been a beastly day altogether, with deep snow on the ground and the temperature below freezing. He managed to get a coach, on leaving Mackenna's shop, but the streets were almost impassable; it was ten o'clock before he reached the flat in Threadneedle Street. As he stomped up the short flight of stairs to the third floor, his boots dropping snow on every step, Benjamin became increasingly apprehensive.

Noise came from every direction—along the halls, from upstairs and down. The usual familiar mumblings, shouts of anger, a sharp female laugh. Heavy footsteps behind him, but recognizable as Tom Stuart's. However, it was a sound that disturbed him, an indefinable one. Then, as he approached the door of his rooms, it became more distinct, separated now from the general din—a scuffle inside. Then a choked cry, loud enough to wake the entire building. Benjamin lunged for the door, his hand fumbling with his key. But the door was not locked and fell open against his weight. He stumbled into the room.

"Good—*lord!*" Benjamin cried, coming to a jerking halt, gaping dumbly at a scene too terrible and bizarre to believe.

A brutish, fiendishly ugly man stood hunched over in the entryway to the pantry closet, startled by Benjamin's sudden entrance. At the creature's feet lay Radcliff Brandon, his throat a gaping wound, blood spurting from the jugular vein. Benjamin's glance flashed from Radcliff, dying before his eyes, up to the immense beast with a knife gripped in his filthy, huge hand. Benjamin shook his head in horrified disbelief. Then the assassin began to move slowly toward Benjamin, his intention clearly written in his eyes, the eyes of a panther, glistening in the dim light.

Benjamin was frozen; he couldn't move—he stood watching the man in numbed fascination. The murderer laughed deep in his throat and lifted his arm, ominously displaying the bloodied knife. He came closer. Suddenly Benjamin regained his senses and made a lunge for the door, his only escape route. But he'd hesitated too long and the brute was too quick for him; the door was blocked by the man's body, which was so large that it completely filled the opening. Benjamin stumbled out of reach of his attacker's slashing arm and fell against a chair. Blind and dumb with fear, he regained his balance. He vaguely heard a man's voice—wasn't it Tom Stuart's? Surely Tom had heard, following so close on the staircase—surely he had heard Radcliff's cry, and he would burst in any moment. But the assassin with the knife continued to stalk

Benjamin, laughing again. They moved round and round the room, but never close enough to the open door for Benjamin to escape.

She appeared as suddenly and unexpectedly as a tornado, and with equal force, placing herself between Benjamin and the assassin. Her blazing eyes fixed on the man, whose mouth fell open in surprise and terror. She screamed and laughed and so strong was her will that she took form: wisps of smoke and mist, undulating, sinking and rising, but easily distinguishable as a woman. She was now the stalker; the brute, the stalked. She blocked the door. He whimpered like a frightened infant, let out a shriek, turned and plunged toward the window. A shattering of glass and he was gone.

Benjamin ran to the window and saw the man three floors below, struggling to rise from the heavy, soft snow and failing; then, finally erect, limping off into the blackness. Benjamin whipped around, rushing to Radcliff. But the man was dead, his body emptied of the blood that wet the floor all around him and had spattered the walls. Sickened, Benjamin turned away. Radcliff's right arm extended outside the pantry, limp on the floor, his hand a fist around a crumpled piece of paper. The fool, Benjamin thought in despair; he'd lost his life searching for papers that didn't exist, willing to steal them since he could get his hands on them no other way.

She was gone—not a wisp of her remained. The place was a shambles. Every cabinet, drawer, and closet had been ransacked, his possessions strewn about.

"'Ere now, what's this we have 'ere—?"

Benjamin slowly turned his head to focus on a constable and two officers. He couldn't find words, only stared blankly into the constable's suspicious eyes.

"Deader'n a doornail, 'ee is, poor blighter," the constable said to Benjamin, after a cursory examination of the body. "Know who 'ee is, do ya?"

Finding his tongue, Benjamin replied dully, "His name is Radcliff Brandon."

"A friend o' yours?"

"Yes."

"It wouldn't o' been yourself that killed 'im now—would it?"

"Of course not!"

"You've got witnesses ta prove it—o' course?"

Benjamin hesitated, fear rising to close his throat. He said defensively, "Tom Stuart—the tanner—he lives on this floor . . . he . . ."

"—run himself half ta death, coming ta fetch us, 'ee did, Tom Stuart. Raving, 'ee was—says 'ee saw somethin' that weren't natural." The constable glanced to the shattered window. "Looks like the culprit 'ee went right through the window. Seems like 'eed a used the door, like 'ee come in. But 'ee leaps out of the window." He turned cold eyes again on Benjamin. "You can describe 'im to us, the one 'at actually done the killin'—since it weren't yourself?"

Benjamin gave the man a rambling description of the brute, unable to make his mind behave rationally and coherently . . . all the while thinking he was only making *himself* sound guilty; hearing his own words, it sounded as though he were making it up as he went along. Tall—yes, very tall. Black hair—no, it was brown, I think. Scars—on his forehead—no, his right cheek . . . or the left.

The constable listened contemptuously. He finally interrupted with, "Now why would 'ee be murderin' your friend 'ere?"

"I—I think he was mistaken for me. I'm sure of it. That knife was meant for me."

The constable's face cracked into a leering grin. "To 'ell with ya. Now 'ood ever believe a man of your type'd be 'ounded by murdering thieves."

The man's tone was bitingly sarcastic. Suspicion once again rearing in him. Benjamin snapped in retort, "It couldn't be that you have been offered a—gratuity for finding me guilty of one crime or another, could it, Constable?"

"Me, sir? Not likely. I'm honest as they come, I am—honest as they come." With that he turned to the two officers who had been wandering about the rooms, poking about the debris, ordering them to remove the body.

Benjamin turned his back when the men took Radcliff by the feet and the shoulders, carrying him out as though he were a carcass of beef for the butcher. The assassin obviously hadn't taken the time to be certain he was doing in the right and intended victim—unless he hadn't been given a description accurate enough. Radcliff must have broken in first and been caught in the act of theft. Good lord, what could he do to prevent a second attempt on his life? Again that sense of being surrounded by invisible enemies, that overwhelming sense of impending doom, filled him.

"I'll 'ave to investigate, mind you. Routine. There's the blood on your pantry floor—but it ain't my job ta clean up after evil doings." The constable moved toward the

door and said over his shoulder, "A good night to ya, Master Darby."

"The name is Thorn!"

"Coo—is it now?" The constable said around the door jamb, then closed the door behind him.

Benjamin stood staring at the door. The fact that he could easily be accused and convicted of Radcliff's murder—Tom Stuart could be paid enough money to tell any story the Grandisons wished him to tell—took second place to his terror at the prospect of a return of the assassin, of a knife slashing his own throat. Police protection in London was, at best, haphazard. Thieves, cut-throats, every type of criminal so outnumbered and outwitted the inefficient members of the individually autonomous wards, their authorities generally confined to their own boundaries, that no sure deterrent whatsoever was represented by the existence of the law. It had become a matter of gambling the odds of being apprehended against the very good odds of getting away completely unsuspected. Hangings took place every week, and still crimes of violence increased daily. No one was safe on the streets after dark. Benjamin was certainly not safe in these rooms. An agonizing suspense would hang over him constantly.

He dropped into a chair and sat there, hunched over, hands gripped tight together, struggling for a solution. He couldn't bring himself to so much as glance toward the pantry, where Radcliff's blood darkened on the floor. He thought he might rent new rooms immediately, under a fictitious name, hoping to lose himself in the city's swollen population. Or he could take himself to a small, coastal borough, lose himself there ...

Hours passed, and he was still sitting in the chair, still bewildered and uncertain as to what action to take.

A thundering against the door brought Benjamin up, startled. He held his breath, ignoring the furious pounding.

"Benjamin—are ya there? Speak ta me, lad—for the love o' God."

Benjamin rushed to the door and hauled it open. MacKenna stood in the shadow, completely overwrought. His wig hung over one ear, and his eysc were dull, as if he had suffered a severe shock. For a moment his eyes clung to Benjamin's face, then he let out a blast of air from his lungs; it was clear that he was painfully relieved. He rushed to Benjamin, flinging his great arms around him

and hugging him energetically. "You're unharmed, lad—I thank God."

Benjamin eased out of the man's clutches, his eyes searching MacKenna's flushed face. "How did you know, MacKenna?" he asked tightly. "MacKenna—why did you think I might have been killed?"

The Scotsman's eyes flew around the room. Slowly he gathered himself together, breathing more normally. "I heard that a murder had been committed in these flats, and I were not told the name o' the victim. I thank God you're safe, lad."

"You heard? So quickly? It can't have happened more than three hours ago."

"I heard—no more can I say. Murderin'—for a bit o' paper. What has the world come ta?" He added carefully, "Have ya investigated—ta see if it be missin'. . . ?"

"If what is missing?"

MacKenna reached up to set his wig somewhat straighter, his eyes avoiding Benjamin's. "If it has come ta murder, would ya not think it better ta give it up and give the papers ta a man that can deal with the Grandisons? Sir Ronald will pay a bonny sum."

"MacKennal" Benjamin shouted, throwing up his arms, "I can hardly sell what I do not have."

"Aye—ya cannot."

"Then stop this plaguing me, and accept it, once and for all. I have no papers!"

MacKenna's face screwed into a pained expression. "I cannot help doubtin' ya, lad—and I'm not the only man with a doubt. It has come ta my attention that Jason Darby were a man o' writin', a man that put his thoughts in a diary."

"Very interesting—but I have not seen his diary."

"Your very life is in danger, lad!"

"Don't you think I am aware of that? My friend is dead. He also thought I had a diary. —MacKenna, I am going to leave the city immediately." He made the decision as he spoke, his mind struggling with a thousand overlapping schemes for escape.

"Leavin'! Ta what place would ya flee?"

"That—will remain my secret. If I am to avoid having my throat cut, I must trust my ingenuity and somehow lose my identity, which I worked eight years to establish. Frankly, MacKenna, I'm frightened. Being quite honest with you, I can think of no better solution than to run for my life."

"But—your royalties—"

"I'll make arrangements with the bank to receive deposits from you. See you don't cheat me. When I return I will demand a full accounting."

"Cheat ya—I would not cheat ya, lad."

Benjamin laughed bitterly, offering no further comment on the subject.

MacKenna's eyes slid around the room again, hungrily searching the scattered papers. "Murder," he muttered, "a dirty business. Ya will take with ya—the bulk o' your things, I suppose."

"Everything. Including the very valuable, much-sought-after documents," Benjamin replied sarcastically. "I will leave as soon as I can get my things together. If you'll go now—I have much to do."

MacKenna gave a last, regretful glance about the room, then began to move toward the door. "I wish ya all good fortune, lad—God keep ya safe. But I do wish ya would tell me where you're going ta be."

"So you can sell the information to Sir Ronald?"

"Benjamin," MacKenna wailed. "Aye, now ya have hurt me deeply."

"Good night, MacKenna," Benjamin said tightly. "Rest assured, we'll meet again."

"Aye. Good-bye."

Benjamin closed the door and wearily leaned his forehead against the panel. He had no idea where to go. The arm of Grandison influence was long, really inescapable. He heard a sound behind him and turned to see the autobiography open on his desk, the pages flipping in the fresh wind that rushed through the gaping wound in the window. He moved to the desk and watched the fluttering pages, entranced. He felt an alteration beginning in him, slowly but persistently; he did not fight against it.

It no longer seemed as though Jason were taking possession of him, but more as though he were undergoing subtly changing moods; from happy to a little sad. He did not lose connection with himself in the true sense; he was always aware of his physical actions, and now far less inclined toward feeling himself a supernatural duplicity. Jason was a part of himself, just as the child that he had been was, even now, a part of the man. Often his mind wandered into his past. He could recapture emotions of those dead days—how he had wept when Samson, his dog, died of old age; that sadness returned for a moment now. And he could vividly relive an afternoon in a cave, when he had first experienced union with a girl; once again he felt the sea spray, heard the pounding of the

waves below, intermingled with the thundering of his heart and the scent of her flesh. With the same kind of movement away from time and reality he slid away from Benjamin Thorn to become the part of himself named Jason. His lungs drew in air and blew it out, his heart beat, his hands and feet, eyes and ears remained unaltered —only his consciousness was transforming. His ambitions, fears, wants, and purposes were subdued, to make room for the aspirations, dreads, and memories that were uniquely Jason's.

He put both hands on the table top, as the pages under him abruptly ceased fluttering. He began to read the passages thus marked for him.

I wandered through the Manor all that night, unable to sleep for the fears that wracked me. Within hours, Clarissa and I would at last be wed, yet sadness took the place of the joy that should have filled my heart. I could not shake from my mind those debts Ronald held against my beloved estate. I questioned, over and over, the sudden turn in Ronald's attitude: from loathing enmity, set upon my utter destruction, bent upon the possession of his sister—to an abrupt agreement to our marriage. I fondly touched banisters and cabinets, as if bidding the house farewell, absolutely consumed by a prediction of doom. Enemies surrounded me. I felt as a man awaiting execution. The hour of my death established, myself notified—forewarned—I said good-bye to that which I had cherished all my days, and my father before me, and his father before him. As the night slowly passed, a rage grew in me, until it was as storm waves battering against cliff and shore, so that I shook and became wet with perspiration. Ronald Cartwright could wrest my lands from me, he had the power, but he would not hold them for long. The Manor was mine. I vowed that I would ascend from Hell to have it back again, to stand on the headland and know that all my eye beheld, on three sides, belonged to me. From the grave, if that was my early fate, I would return to Clarissa, poor troubled angel, and to my beloved Manor. I despised the very name of Cartwright, with a passion that rendered me ill and set me to retching—

"Ja-son," she sighed, moving close to him.

He looked up from the pages and met her eyes, tears

welling into his own. "Clarissa," he whispered, "—I cannot reach you. Clarissa—"

Slowly she took form, at first ethereal, then distinct and tangible. Her red hair fell curling over her shoulders and bosom, flowing down her back. Her eyes were emerald green and filled with a soulful happiness.

"Jason, do you remember—how we danced on the moor? Do you remember, Jason?"

"Yes—yes, I remember, Clarissa."

"Hold me in your arms, as you did then."

He reached for her—and she was warm. Holding her hands in his, he began to turn slowly, sadness fleeing, the room vanishing. Cool evening breezes blew; the scent of heather and wild lilacs was soft in the air. A dog howled from somewhere far out on the moor. Laughing now, for there was no pain in this memory, he whirled her round and round until he collapsed to the soft earth, catching her tight in his arms.

A clock struck the hour of midnight, the harsh sound destroying the illusion. She melted from his arms, and he cried out for her, but she was lost in a brutal reality, only her sighs lingering on.

With a light leather case in each hand, Benjamin stepped out of the carriage into a dismal, soaking rain. The street was darkly shadowed, though it was midday. The piled snow was melting. Recently paving had been laid so that there was now a slushy walkway along the street which extended to the walls of the brick buildings, the doors opening directly on the paving. The houses here were some of those rebuilt after the great fire, which had been a blessing in disguise, resulting in the modernization of the gutted areas of the city.

Benjamin approached the door numbered 600, put down his bags, and jerked the bell chain. Wind slapped rain against his back, and water ran from the brim of his hat in steady rivulets. No answer came, so he again hauled on the chain, the bell clanging a shrill command within. At last the door opened wide.

"Why—it's Master Thorn!" Edmund Masterson exclaimed, genuinely surprised and apparently pleased. "Come in, please do. Beastly weather, simply beastly."

Benjamin brought his bags into the warmly lighted foyer, standing speechless and dripping on the luxurious carpet.

"My apologies for taking so long in answering your

ring. I thought Julian was about, but he seems to have vanished momentarily. Here, give me your cloak."

"I hope you'll forgive my coming uninvited, without first—"

"Nonsense. I was disgustingly bored. It's very good to see you."

His cloak, hat, and boots deposited on the rack near the door, Benjamin followed his gracious host into a well-lighted library, where a warm fire blazed. It was a tasteful room, extremely plain in its furnishings, the mahogany pieces expensive but simple in their clean lines and the absence of ornate carving. The upholstered furniture was equally modest in design and color. Books filled shelves extending from floor to ceiling along three walls. A life-sized portrait of an equally wholesome, unadorned lady graced the wall over the fireplace.

Benjamin sat on a comfortable divan before the fire, accepting a crystal goblet of red wine from Squire Masterson.

"Can I hope, by this visit," Masterson said, from where he stood by the fire, "that you have reconsidered my offer?"

"Perhaps," Benjamin said vaguely, sipping the wine that warmed his knotted innards. "I came seeking favor of another nature, actually."

"Ah? I'll be most happy to aid you in any way I can. You look quite troubled, if I may say so."

"How far is Withernsea Grange from Hedgewood Manor, Squire Masterson?"

The man's eyes showed some surprise, but he answered quickly, "Two hours by horse, sir. Why do you ask?"

Benjamin gulped down the rest of the wine in his goblet and eased into the back of the divan. "I am in grave danger, Squire. My friend from my years at Cambridge was murdered last night, mistaken for myself, I fear."

"Great Scott!" the Squire exclaimed. "An appalling situation."

"As you learned on our first meeting, I am distrustful of everyone I meet. But I was in such a quandary as to what road to take, I finally decided there was nothing for it but to put my trust in someone freely—someone who had it within his power to offer me some little protection: yourself, sir. Presumptuous of me, I realize, but, as I say, I simply had no other course but to approach you."

Squire Masterson made no comment. He strode to the cabinet where the wine decanter rested and brought it to

Benjamin, refilling his glass and his own. He replaced the decanter, then turned to study Benjamin severely.

"I am suspected of plagiarism, sir," Benjamin said emotionally, "of possessing certain writings of which I have no knowledge whatsoever."

"Of course," Squire Masterson said sympathetically. "A sticky predicament. Not only the Grandisons hounding you, but every man-jack with an idea to line his pockets."

"Yes, exactly," Benjamin said, much relieved to have so quickly gained understanding. He tried very hard not to read into the man's words insinuations that were not there. "I have yet to meet a man, since the publication, who would accept me as anything but a liar and ulterior of motive."

"Not I, Master Thorn. I believe you, absolutely, when you say you have no such papers."

"I thank you, sir. But why do you so quickly accept my honesty in this? You do not know me."

Squire Masterson brought up his goblet and drained the wine. His wide mouth turned down at the corners and his eyes glinted with rather sinister lights. "Because, my good man, I have the papers myself, have had them for over six years now."

"You're *joking!*" Benjamin exclaimed, lurching forward on the seat. "There *are* no papers. How could there be? Your humor escapes me, sir."

"But you are wrong, Master Thorn, quite patently mistaken. The collected writings and the diary of Jason Darby—shall we say, mysteriously disappeared some six years ago. Why do you suppose the Grandisons are so disturbed, eh? They are not the kind to chase shadows, nor to suffer hysterical delusions."

"My God," Benjamin gasped. Stunned, he could only gape at the man before him, wondering if he had been wise in approaching the Squire. . . . Why he had taken this road, Benjamin did not know. He had stepped out of the bank, after receiving a letter of credit and making the necessary arrangements to have MacKenna deposit funds, put his hand in his pocket, and brought forth Squire Masterson's card. An unexplainable sudden impulse had led him to this house.

"Now you know my ulterior motive, Master Thorn," Squire Masterson smiled stiffly. "Your suspicions were not altogether unjustified."

"Why didn't you speak out? Why do you tell me this fantastic news, at this time?"

"I was very uncertain of you, if I may say so—and, I

might add, I am not particularly trusting of you even now. You can well understand my dismay, on opening your book, to discover that the papers I had kept hidden so diligently for over six years had been flagrantly duplicated and thrown to the dogs, so to speak, into the grimy paws of the vulgar mob."

"Duplicated?" Benjamin asked weakly. "You do not mean that, literally?"

Squire Masterson sat down in a chair opposite Benjamin. He crossed one finely hosed leg over the other and folded his fingers together under his chin, eyeing Benjamin with a frowning scrutiny. "How impossibly innocent you do appear; no wonder you are so suspected of bad intention. The purely innocent more often than not fluster and give all the appearance of guilt, while a self-disciplined rake often affects a glossy surface of wide-eyed pure-heartedness."

"Obviously, sir, if what you say is true, that you are in possession of Jason Darby's papers, you are as glossy on the surface as I *appear* to be. You can be many things, from thief and murderer to good sort with noble intention."

"I did not steal the papers," Squire Masterson said firmly.

"Nor could I have copied them while they were in your possession."

"I said nothing about copying, Master Thorn."

"You implied something to that—"

"I simply comment on your performance of wide-eyed bewilderment. Considering the feat you accomplished, evidenced in the published work, I would have expected you to react to my news with something more than childlike confounding. Certainly your intentions were clear to you, as you wrote the work, or visioned it, whatever."

"You would not accept an explanation of pure coincidence, I suppose."

"I fear not, Master Thorn. The papers in my possession deny any possibility of that worn-out literary alibi."

Benjamin frowned and chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. His eyes roved about the room, then rested again on the calm man opposite him. "Perhaps I was possessed by the spirit of Jason Darby," he said with deliberate tones of irony.

Edmund Masterson's eyes darkened perceptively, but his expression did not alter, nor did he react in any way.

"Are you a believer in spirits of the dead having the

power to visit themselves on the living, Squire Master-
son?"

The man's face was a mask of intensity. "Master Thorn, it is an age of tolerance and enlightened philosophy—the Devil has grown old, and accusations of sorcery are now rare, burnings even rarer. Still, I hesitate to answer that question, on the grounds that some, even today, consider belief in the supernatural synonymous with the practice of necromancy. I will say that I believe in the marvelous visions of Swedenborg in his ability to predict, envision, if you will, future events."

"Could not the reverse be possible?" Benjamin asked eagerly. "A man seeing backward into time, rather than forward?"

"Supernaturalism, in England today, under the influence of Swedenborg, is a religious craze, Master Thorn. But what is impossible, if a man like Swedenborg can recite the contents of a queen's letter known only to herself and her brother who had been dead many years? What is impossible, eh?"

"As I recited the contents of a certain diary," Benjamin said pointedly.

"Go out in the streets and tell the mob that you are one with Swedenborg, and they will believe you. As the man said, 'Show me four persons who swear it is midnight when it is noon, and I will show you ten thousand to believe them.' As well as being an age of tolerance and enlightenment, this is a time of crass credulity and lingering, reformed superstition."

"You are saying, then, that you do not believe in the supernatural."

"I am speaking purely from a rational point of view, in argument against your attempt to attach something supernatural to your feat."

"You are a very cautious man, sir."

"Indeed I am. If I were not, the culprit who killed your friend might be skulking after me. I have no yen to end my days at the hand of a cutthroat."

"Of course, I am taking your word that you have such documents."

"Yes, I fear you must."

"How did you come by them, if you did not steal them?"

"That I can't tell you at this time. Consider this. No one in the world except you and I knows that I have these papers. I have put myself in jeopardy by telling you this much. You are a stranger to me. Will you turn what I tell

you to your own profit? I don't know. A rather foolish impulse brought me to brag of my possession—something more, really, but we will discuss that at another time. Let it suffice to say that I *do* have the documents, and that I *will* aid you in surmounting the dangers you face."

Benjamin heaved a sigh, resigning himself to trust in the man. "If you could answer just one question," he said in a low voice, "I would be most grateful."

"Perhaps."

"How long did Clarissa Darby live after Jason was . . . died?"

"Should I know the answer to that?"

"I only hoped—I am very curious about her, surely you can understand that. In a way, I lived with her for several months, during the writing of the book. A writer's characters become very real to him."

"When you ask how long she lived, you are speaking of her as 'real,' disavowing fictional characterization, which, again, leads me to suspect deviousness. Did you write a piece of historical fiction, or an historical record of fact, Master Thorn?"

"God only knows," Benjamin murmured. "Perhaps you have heard of her fate, in Withernsea?"

"Master Thorn—Clarissa Grandison Darby was a close friend of mine. She survived Jason Darby by seventy-four years."

"Seventy-four years," Benjamin whispered. "Then—she died in the year 1773."

"To be precise, on the twentieth of October, 1773."

"Of course . . ." Benjamin said vaguely, deep in thought, remembering that night in the flat on Bergen Street. The twentieth of October, the day of her death. Pulling himself out of his stupor, he straightened his shoulders and sighed. "Strange indeed, as the good book says, are the ways of the Lord, or the Devil."

Squire Masterson rose to his feet, smiling again. "Indeed you have no idea how strange, Master Thorn. Clarissa Darby was a most remarkable woman, most extraordinary. In your book you evidenced a great deal of knowledge of her, but you know nothing, have a great deal more to learn about your so-called 'character.' —If you will excuse me, I will see your bags to your room, and order our meal. You will accept my invitation to be my house guest, of course."

"I will, most gratefully, sir."

Left to himself, Benjamin rose and walked to the fire.

He gazed into the blue and green shaded flames and thought he saw her lovely young face there, smiling triumphantly. "Yes, Jason—yes."

◆ CHAPTER FIVE ◆

With every unsettling jolt of the coach, Benjamin's teeth clattered together. Holding on to the leather strap fastened to the window molding, he bounced in ridiculous fashion on the seat, lurching this way and that. Masterson's private coach was decidedly more pleasant than a public or mail coach would have been, but this fact did nothing to soothe Benjamin's irritation. It had been raining when they left London, at dawn three days ago, and rain had fallen ever since, now turning to snow. His boots were mud-caked. Mud had splattered to the shoulders of his cloak and was now drying, falling in clods all around him on the seat. The sound of the coachman's whip was as incessant as the maddening tick of the watch in Squire Masterson's pocket.

"Cheer yourself, Benjamin," Masterson said. "We will reach Manchester by nightfall, with luck."

"Hmm," Benjamin muttered, leaning to peer out the little window.

"You do look a bit different, I must say. I doubt very much if anyone would recognize you."

Benjamin sat back, gritting his teeth against the vigorous jolts. The road from London to Exeter was newly paved, had been a smooth ride at twelve miles an hour. But the Pike project had not progressed beyond Exeter; this road was a continuous washboard of sinkholes, boulders, and ruts. He brought his free hand up to touch the ponderous, curled wig adorning his head. Tight ringlets fell over his forehead and framed his face. He wore square spectacles of clear glass. All this in the hope that his identity could be concealed from two persons having been given opportunity to study the face of Benjamin Thorn.

"I am not good at this sort of intrigue, I fear," Benjamin complained. "I shall more than likely blurt out my right name, or become confused and forget I am supposed to be a poet and not a storyteller."

Squire Masterson laughed softly. "We shall see," he said unconcernedly. "Few social gatherings will be forthcoming until spring. We will have the remainder of the winter to prepare you fully."

"Clarissa Grandison struck me as rather shrewd," Benjamin said sourly.

"She is, very much so."

"Then I cannot hope to deceive her. This ridiculous—"

"She has been deceived before, though she may not know it."

Benjamin sternly examined the man's impassive face. He had lived a fortnight in close company with Squire Masterson, and he knew no more than he did that first afternoon in the man's house. He had asked no questions but had hoped answers would be forthcoming. Much to his continuing distress, the Squire maintained a firm policy of close-mouthed, friendly abeyance, not speaking again of the collected writings of Jason Darby. The Squire's business required that he return to Withernsea Grange. He had not wanted to leave Benjamin to himself in London, and so suggested this ruse. John Lester Rollingsby, he was to say on introducing himself, protégé of Squire Masterson; struggling, unsung poet. Withernsea Grange was supposed to be a quiet refuge where he could live incognito, write, and be forgotten by the person or persons unknown who harbored an intention to murder the author of Jason Darby's autobiography.

"And how far is it," Benjamin asked after a long silence between them, "from Manchester to Withernsea Grange?"

"Another two days; the roads are deplorable."

Benjamin heaved a weary sigh, resigning himself to three more days of this brutal jouncing. He hated to think how many more hills lay ahead, mud on them a foot deep or clogged with snow. Once again he'd be forced out into the weather to follow behind the coach, up to his hips in muck and mire, called on to lend a pushing hand to free the wheels from a sinkhole. And not a moment passed but a highwayman could appear, to grasp what little money they carried. On entering the coach in London, Squire Masterson had removed all jewels save one finger ring, taking the bulk of his money and placing the lot in a tiny vault hidden behind the upholstered back of his seat. He had said, when Benjamin questioned him, that he had been robbed an even dozen times in his years of traveling this road, and that not once had a culprit discovered his secret cache. He always wore a fake jewel, and carried sufficient money to satisfy the thieves; an added expense to journey-

ing that one simply had to accept in these times. Despite how matter-of-factly the man had spoken, Benjamin had become extremely nervous about the possibility of being waylaid, and had not gotten over it.

The day passed slowly. Twice they were forced out into the bitter cold to walk behind the coach. The snow did not stick, melting quickly as it fell. But as they approached Manchester, long after nightfall, the countryside passing by the windows, lighted under a moon coming from behind dispersing dark clouds, was completely blanketed in snow. Wind screamed and thrashed against the coach. Their breaths left their mouths in vaporous clouds, and they began to pound their feet on the floor of the coach, slapping gloved hands together. Benjamin got no sleep at all. The coach drew up to a dark inn somewhat after midnight.

Benjamin was led by a nightshirted, skullcapped innkeeper to a mildewy, grim room on the second floor. The ancient fellow lit a fire and set open the covers of the bed without a word, quickly leaving Benjamin to himself. The storm shutters rattled as if someone outside were beating on them to gain entrance. The fire had not caught well and sputtered out. Benjamin threw off his cloak, letting it fall over a chair, then sat down to yank off his filthy boots. The bed called him as sirens had called to Ulysses, voluptuous and inviting in its look of sheer comfort.

He had just crawled into bed, the quilts drawn up to his chin, when muffled voices fell on his ear, coming, it seemed, from behind the wall panel against which the head of his bed rested. He ignored the sounds, until a woman's voice rose rather excitedly, the timbre of that voice distinctly familiar. Rearing up in the bed, he swung himself over to plant his ear against the panel.

"Edmund, you must understand," the woman pleaded, her words quite easy to catch, for the wall was thin. "At least try to see it from my point of view."

Edmund Masterson's voice was recognizable, but he spoke so low, or was so far across the room that Benjamin could not make out his reply.

"I am her daughter, Edmund—a Grandison as well. I have my pride, and my responsibilities. I have waited here two days, hoping you would bring some better news than—"

Her words abruptly broke off. Benjamin waited with breath held through the long silence.

"Someone tried to murder him, Clarissa," Edmund

Masterson said, so clearly that Benjamin jerked, startled.
"I say that is carrying this thing just a bit too far."

"And I say, it's a damned shame the culprit failed!"

"Clarissa! In the name of God, tell me you had nothing to do with it. It isn't *possible*."

"What did you think of him, really? Ronald insists the man is a scoundrel, that his intention is somehow to utterly destroy us all. . . . Ronald is up to something, not confiding in me. Edmund you must tell me more than 'he seems innocent enough.'"

"How could he destroy you? With accusations of old murders? Clarissa, you are seeing more in this than there is to see."

"I am not secure in my title to the estate—you know that better than anyone else. What else does this rake know? What other papers does he possess? I am frantic, Edmund, out of my mind with worry."

Their voices lowered so that Benjamin heard no more of the conversation, until Masterson's voice said huskily, "Clarissa—I love you. When will you tell Ronald about us, and marry me? How long can you expect to keep me hanging this way, hiding our love in shabby rooms like this, always hoping—"

Benjamin let his breath out in a hissing sigh, and slid down to lay flat on the bed, staring at the black ceiling. And Masterson had said so blandly, "I have had the honor of meeting Mistress Grandison." In the name of God, what had he gotten himself into now? Glossy, indeed, was the surface Edmund Masterson showed to the world, and to this embattled writer of a most curious biography.

At precisely nine in the morning, Squire Masterson entered Benjamin's room; he was cloaked and hatted. Smiling, he said that it was time to be off again. At eight, Benjamin had been awakened by a steward with a tray of rolls, preserves, and black coffee.

"Did you have a visitor last night?" Benjamin asked matter-of-factly as he threw his cloak over his shoulder. "I thought I heard a woman's voice, coming from your room."

Masterson turned, as if he had not heard the question, striding out of the room and vanishing down the long corridor.

Benjamin quickly followed, stopping in the foyer to question the innkeeper.

"Is Mistress Clarissa Grandison a guest here? She's an old friend of mine—"

"No, sir, not her. She'd never come to a place like this, not her kind. The likes of her stays at the Marblehead, where the pots what you cook in are made o' gold. No Grandisons ever come here, sir."

"You have no spinster ladies as guests here?"

"Not now, sir. We did have a spinster lady—pretty thing she was, too—from Dorchester, she was, 'bout two months back."

"Thank you," Benjamin said sourly, turning on his heel and striding out into the flurry of snow.

With Manchester a good distance behind them, and not a word having passed between them, Benjamin glanced across to Masterson's impassive face and said, "You took no pains to keep your meeting secret, Squire. Surely you realized that I might hear your voices through—"

"Benjamin," Squire Masterson said roughly, his eyes squinting and lighted with anger. "I would appreciate it if, during our association, you would be so kind as to mind your own damned business."

Insulted, Benjamin said between clenched teeth, "I rather thought it might *be* my business, since I was included in your remarks to each other."

Masterson turned his head to look out the window, where nothing was visible but a spatter-print of falling snowflakes. "I have said all I intend to say on the subject."

Benjamin followed the man's gaze, swallowing a rising anger. Without thinking, he said, "We will reach Glenmire by evening. Shall we stay there the night?"

A long silence passed between them. Benjamin felt Masterson's eyes on him, and turned to face the man.

"Why do you stare at me like that?" Benjamin complained.

"How did you know Glenmire was our next stop, Benjamin?"

Benjamin frowned. "Why, you must have mentioned the fact, or the coachmen."

"No. Glenmire was not mentioned by any of us."

"I—well, I suppose that I simply guessed at it."

"Glenmire has a population of forty people, the village consisting of a wayside inn and ale house, a few cottages, and little more. I doubt if anyone outside this immediate area has heard of Glenmire, let alone knows its precise location."

Benjamin glared into the man's suspicious eyes and could find no words of explanation.

"You have visited the county before?"

"No, Squire. I have traveled no farther north than Cambridge."

"If you say so."

"I most certainly do say so. Will we stay the night at Glenmire?"

"No. We will get what sleep we can in the coach, stopping only for a meal."

Benjamin sat back in the seat and tried to get comfortable. This road was, as Masterson had warned, deplorable, more a track hewn out of moors and patches of forest. Long ago the entire area had been a vast woodland of rich timber, but the increasing population, the subsequent building boom, and the need for more farmland had rendered the face of the land stripped and desolate. Under snow, the landscape appeared godforsaken, a frozen wilderness. Snow had piled deep on the road, so that progress was painfully slow. The inside of the coach was freezing.

As the hours passed, Benjamin grew increasingly uneasy. Certain landmarks began to seem familiar—an ancient wall rearing out of the snow, a lonely farmhouse nearby; he even thought he knew the name of the landsman who lived in the isolated house: Horace Inglewood. But that was ridiculous. Of course Jason Darby would remember—he knew this county well, for it had been his home and his father's before him. How strange, to come on a place that you know you have never seen before, and feel this strong sense of returning, of coming home.

The sky cleared late in the second day out of Manchester, and the sun shone brightly. Benjamin kept his eye on the scenes passing the window, searching for something in particular. Then he saw the tall hedges, snowcapped, running in wide avenues as far as his eye could see, and, beyond, the rooftops and chimneys of Hedgewood Manor. It was just as his visions had showed it to him a thousand times. He could not see it, but he knew Bridington Firth was just the other side of the far wood. The windows of the east and north wings looked over the narrow inlet and the headland on which he had stood so often.

"Hedgewood Manor," Squire Masterson said in a low voice, watching Benjamin's face.

"Yes," Benjamin whispered.

"It is quite as you described it in your book, is it not?"

"Yes, it is."

"Withernsea Grange is directly across Bridlington Firth. The land was once owned by the Darbys, a part of their estate. I purchased the Grange from Clarissa, when she was in need of some cash."

"Which Clarissa?" Benjamin asked vaguely, his eyes glued to the passing scene.

"The elder, of course."

"Briarmoor is to the north—" Benjamin commented.

"Yes, of course."

"—near Grimsby-on-the-sea," Benjamin added huskily.

Squire Masterson's eyes were hard on him again, but Benjamin avoided looking at the man. He shivered in a sudden blast of cold air. "There!" he exclaimed, lurching forward in the seat, putting his face close to the window. "We met there, near the wayside well, when we were little children. She had come to visit the—"

"Benjamin," Squire Masterson said sharply, leaning to put a hand on Benjamin's arm. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Of course," Benjamin snapped. "Clarissa and I met there for the first time. I didn't see her again for some eight years; she was away at school in Paris. The Grandisons were clandestinely Catholic, at least her branch of the family, and—"

"What is your name?" Squire Masterson asked huskily, his eyes darkly searching Benjamin's twisted features.

"Jason," he answered haughtily. "Jason Darby."

The Squire sucked in a breath and held it. He fell back against the seat and stared at his companion, whose entire manner had altered. His usually steady hands had begun to twitch nervously, and his mouth had drooped into pouting lines. One leg flew up to cross over the other, the foot swinging up and down jerkily, testifying to great tension.

"She was Catholic, you say?" the Squire asked roughly.

"Yes, but not Ronald. He knew what was to his advantage and what was not. To be Catholic was to be dead politically, if not literally; a Catholic's lands were confiscated. It was a time of terror; witch-hunting on the Continent, Catholic-hunting in England."

"—So she was schooled in Paris?"

"Why have we turned? I say, Hedgewood Manor is—"

"We are traveling to Withernsea Grange, not to Hedgewood Manor."

"There is a Grange—at Withernsea?"

"Do sit back and rest, please. It will be some time before we arrive."

Benjamin leaned back, his head reeling. Wearily he closed his eyes. He saw her face clear behind the curtain of his eyelids, laughing gaily, young and laughing. His hands knotted into tight fists that he began to beat against the seat back.

"Clarissa!" Benjamin cried out, exploding forward.

A hand struck him in the face, the spell falling away from him as the shell from an egg, and he went completely limp, caught by strong arms.

"You are not a well man," Squire Masterson said urgently, as he sat Benjamin straight in the corner of the coach.

Benjamin brought his hands up to cover his face, whispering behind them, "No, I am not well, not well at all."

Benjamin slept through the night and half the next day.

He slowly opened his eyes, for long moments suffering complete bafflement; he was unable to remember where he was. A fire blazed across the large room and a candle burned on the cabinet beside his bed. Gradually his senses returned, and he threw back the covers, swinging his legs over, placing his feet on the floor. He noticed a paper leaning against the candle holder, and reached to bring it before his swollen, painful eyes. Squire Masterson's hand, informing him that food was being kept warm in the kitchen whenever he felt up to eating.

He felt as though he were in the throes of a hangover from a night of drinking; his vision was blurred, tongue thick, his head axed from within by invisible demons. In a haze he dressed himself in the same clothes he had worn from Manchester, since they were conveniently tossed on the nearest chair. He went to the door and cautiously opened it. The hall was well lighted. No one was about. As he moved toward the staircase, he again took note of the severity of Masterson's taste; the house was almost humble in its lack of pretension. The stair was wide, open, and curved, the banisters constructed of smooth, polished mahogany.

A young woman rushed out of a door and nearly ran headlong into Benjamin as he strode across the expansive foyer. "Ah," she gasped, her kerchief rushing to her slightly pugged nose. "Master Rollingsby, is it not?"

"It is," Benjamin replied thickly, cursing himself for forgetting the wig and spectacles. "And who are you?"

"Agatha Masterson. . . . Do excuse me, won't you? I'm in a beastly rush. My camellias."

She was away before he could reply, her ruffled, hooped skirt rustling with each quick step. He stood dismayed, turning in circles. Some five doors opened off the foyer; which to take? He thought he might shout, summoning a little attention and direction, but then thought better of it. Choosing the door from which the young woman had exploded, he approached it and knocked lightly.

"Come in," Masterson's voice called, muffled.

"One chance out of five, and I picked the right door," Benjamin said in a stiff attempt at humor, as he entered a library salon.

"Good afternoon," Masterson said, removing a pipe from his mouth. "Are you feeling better?"

"Not much better, I'm afraid, sir."

"Sit down. I'll have Gertie bring you something to eat. Would you have breakfast, or lunch?"

"Anything," Benjamin said, falling into a highbacked chair across from the man's kingly desk.

Masterson rose and moved to the door, to yank on a hanging, embroidered ribbon; a bell clanged musically. A scrubbed, round woman of middle years quickly answered the summons and received the order for a tray.

Masterson returned to his desk, leaned to turn over a paper he had been studying, then moved to the fire. He lifted a poker and stirred up a good flame.

"Who is Agatha?" Benjamin asked.

"My sister. I have raised her. She is eighteen years younger than myself, quite like a daughter to me."

"You never married?"

"My wife passed away some ten years ago. We had only two years together."

There the conversation came to an abrupt halt. The tray was brought and Benjamin ate with a relish that surprised him, considering the nervous condition of his stomach. Creamed dried beef and whipped eggs, preserves and rolls; all quite delicious.

"Would you care to discuss your peculiar behavior of last night?" Squire Masterson asked at last.

"Not particularly."

"You can understand how curious I am."

"I don't doubt it, but no more curious, I'm sure, than I am in regard to yourself and your own peculiar behavior."

Masterson, seated again behind his desk, puffed hard at

his pipe, tamping the tobacco with a thumb. He said, "Ah, we are all peculiar to some extent. Let me assure you, I am not shocked, or in the least contemptuous of your—your seizure; shall we call it that? If it was genuine, of course. I have seen such things happen before."

"You have?"

"Indeed," the man casually replied.

Benjamin's head had cleared. The food had renewed his strength and refreshed his spirit. For the first time, he let his eyes raise to inspect the room. The fireplace was to his right, almost behind him. He turned, his eyes scanning upward.

"Clarissa!" Benjamin exclaimed, rearing out of his chair. He swung about and stood under the portrait over the mantel, staring up at it. "Where did you get this painting?"

"You recognized her immediately . . ."

"Young Clarissa looks very much like her, don't you agree?" Benjamin said evasively.

"A family resemblance, little more. The color of the hair and eyes are the strongest similarity, but the shape of the nose and mouth, the chin—"

"She was most remarkably beautiful."

"I didn't know her when she was like this. She was very wizened when I first met her; all her beauty had vanished. She was sixty-two years old when I was born. I came to Yorkshire sixteen years ago, with my goodly inheritance and a grand vision of stately living; a country gentleman and all that."

"She was in her eighties, then, before you knew her."

"That's correct."

"She often wore gowns that matched her hair," Benjamin said, studying the figure on the canvas with regret moist in his eyes.

"Even in old age she wore red, when her hair was entirely white. 'Jason loved me in red,' she would say."

Benjamin turned away from the portrait, moving to sit back in his chair. He let his glance fall to the buckles on his shoes, avoiding Masterson's probing eyes.

Edmund Masterson abruptly got to his feet and walked to a high bookshelf, removing five heavy volumes and laying them on a near cabinet. The books had hidden a wall safe. He unlocked the safe with an ornate key and withdrew a small, ribbon-tied packet of papers with a brown, tooled-leather volume at the top.

"I thought perhaps you would like to see the proof of

my claim," Masterson said in a low voice, offering Benjamin the packet.

Benjamin dumbly accepted the papers but could only stare at them.

"Examine them," the Squire pressed, moving to sit across from Benjamin.

With clumsy fingers Benjamin untied the ribbons; the papers fell loose. He took up the diary and cautiously opened it. The handwriting struck him first; it was so familiar—Jason's. Then the words washed over him, chilling him so that he shivered and felt goose-flesh.

22 March, 1695. More in autobiography than diary, I begin on this page, already twenty years and one. I shall add passages, as the future reveals itself to me, but for now I will concern myself with the past.

I will not begin with my birth, nor that of my father. So much of what I am, what I hope and fear, cherish and endure, is imbedded in the past, in the roots of Hedgewood Manor, in the stalwart purpose of Hugh Darby. . . .

Benjamin slammed the book closed, his eyes flying to Squire Masterson's impassive face. "I cannot believe it possible," he hissed emotionally. "A duplication, just as you said."

"You will not accuse me of copying from your book, eh? In an attempt to deceive you?"

"No, that isn't possible."

"Ah?"

"There is stark evidence here to the contrary." Benjamin added in pleading tones, "Since you have shown me these papers, can you not now explain how they came into your possession?"

Squire Masterson leaned back into the cushion of his chair, crossed a leg, and said around his pipe stem, "I received the packet in the post, on the day she died. She probably had them posted two days before; it's difficult to say."

"Why would she send such treasures to you, sir?"

"To that question I have for the years since sought the answer. Let's say I have my suspicions, but no answers, none at all."

"There was no letter accompanying?"

"There was."

Benjamin waited for elaboration, but none came. "You will not reveal the letter."

"She was very old—ninety-eight—and her mind no longer lucid. The letter was, for the most part, incoherent and filled with what appeared to be symbolisms of distorted memories and confused reality."

"I see. But why avoid showing it to me?"

"... Not yet."

Benjamin glanced down to the loose pages, fingering them with trembling hands. Without unfolding them, he knew every word scrawled on them. He said, without looking at Masterson, "You carry mysteriousness a bit far, I think."

"Hah!" Masterson laughed, "The pot calling the kettle black, I must say. Who, sir, could be more mysterious than yourself?—carrying it to such lengths that I, who consider myself most astute, find it impossible to determine whether you are an extremely clever rake, insane, or . . . I am being cautious. No more mysterious than that. When I am convinced one way or the other about you, you will receive my entire cooperation."

"And what must I do to convince you?"

"That I will keep as my little secret. Sufficient to say, the truth will out. If you are a rake, I will soon enough know it."

Benjamin eased the papers to the seat beside him and rose to his feet. "I feel that our association is going to be nothing but uncomfortable, sir. Perhaps I had best take myself—"

"Nonsense," Squire Masterson snapped, banging his pipe against the ashtray on the stand beside his chair. "Without my protection you would not survive the winter. And rest assured, my inclinations are most friendly. I want you to be honest, believe me."

Benjamin muttered doubtfully and moved to the door.

"Feel completely free to wander anywhere; the house is yours," Squire Masterson said behind him.

Benjamin left the room and again stood, indecisive, in the high-ceilinged foyer. He walked under the staircase to an open door, passed through a short hallway, and stepped into an enclosed garden; the ceiling and walls were almost entirely glass, the light defracted greatly by the smallness of the individual panes bound together into a whole by wooden moldings. Fuchsias bloomed profusely in earthenware pots . . . gardenias and roses.

Suddenly a glossy head appeared, disheveled and smiling brightly.

"Master Rollingsby," Agatha said. "We meet again, and still have not been properly introduced; my brother is most careless of the little courtesies."

She came around the waist-high bin, wiping her hands on her apron. Her features were plain, as simple as all else in Masterson's surroundings; her apparel was rich in material but homespun in design. Her black hair was straight, held out of the way with a ribbon at the back. She was very young in appearance, looking not more than sixteen.

"You have a lovely winter garden," he said graciously.

"It is my greatest pleasure in life," she breathed. "In the spring I will transplant the fuchsias to their outside beds, and the gardenias. I must keep the fires burning twenty-four hours a day, you know, or they will freeze to death."

"I know very little about flowers."

"A pity," she smiled, studying his face. "You are a poet, I understand. Clarissa used to compose sonnets, but I doubt if she does anymore. They were quite good."

"Clarissa?" he asked tightly.

"Clarissa Grandison. We practically grew up together. Ah, but you wouldn't know who I'm talking about, forgive me. She is the adopted daughter and grandniece of the departed Clarissa Darby, who was also a Grandison. Of course, you know the Grandison name."

"Of course."

"I was six years old when Edmund brought me here; our parents were the victims of pox. Clarissa was also six, an equal victim of cruel circumstances, her mother dying of an infection following her birth and her father committing suicide out of inconsolable grief. Old Clarissa had taken her in and adopted her . . . Ah, but we were speaking of poetry. How did I get so off the track? My mind does have a habit of skipping about."

"You lived with this Clarissa Darby?" he pressed, hoping he did not sound too anxious.

"For a time, yes. Edmund and the old woman became fast friends. He seemed to comprehend her instantly, whereas everyone else simply said, 'she is utterly bereft,' and made no effort to understand her. To this day he speaks in awe of her, how at the age of eighty-five she could sit a horse with all the majesty and skill of a young queen. Edmund was searching for land. He simply had his mind set on turning the family tide, so to speak. Our father was a merchantman, very wealthy, and grandfather was in insurance. But Edmund wanted exactly what he has today . . ."

"Your mind is wandering—again," Benjamin said, smiling warmly at her.

"Gracious, yes. I hope you'll forgive me. May I call you John?"

"By all means."

"I will have tea now . . . will you join me, John?"

"If you'll promise to tell me more about the old woman, I am fascinated."

"Oh, I agree, most happily. I loved her dearly, peculiar as she was. There's no one I'd rather talk about. You must stop me, though, if I begin to bore you."

"You could not possibly bore me, Mistress Masterson."

"Agatha."

"Shall we have tea, Agatha?"

◆ CHAPTER SIX ◆

"Almost everyone who knew her thought she was insane," Agatha said, swallowing a bite of teacake. "But I have never known a more shrewd, mentally agile person."

Benjamin sat forward in his chair, his eyes fixed on Agatha's prim little mouth, from which so many answers flowed. She was an angel of deliverance from a dark perplexity.

Agatha went on to say that she could only relate the earlier years of Lady Darby's life at Hedgewood Manor from hearsay, which, of course, was most undependable. The villagers of Hedgeborough contended to this day that the red-haired widow had been a witch and still haunted Grimsby Moor on moonless nights, dancing and singing as if in the company of him, her lost husband. Old folks said that they could recall seeing her, flame-hair flying in the wind, running through the heather, talking and laughing with an invisible escort. And some said they had seen that escort: that he was not invisible, holding the witch's hand in his; and round and round they would dance, until they fell exhausted, lying on a bed of moss tight in each others' arms . . .

"—Her husband," Benjamin said, interrupting. "Tell me of him."

"Jason Darby," Agatha said, her mouth twisting into a pout. "You must have heard of him. His name is on

everyone's lips hereabouts, and in London, too, I hear—since the publication of that vile—"

"Ah, *that* Jason Darby. Yes, I have heard of the notorious book."

"An abomination. Poor soul, you cannot blame her for being grief-stricken, with him dying on the very day of their wedding. He went for his swim, as was quite consistent with his daily habit, and, poor man, he drowned."

"Consistent with his daily habit? On his wedding night?"

Agatha thought about it, then dismissed the insinuation, as she leaned to refill their teacups. "The accident, the tragic loss, added to the hatred she held for her half-brother, warped her reason, I think. To her dying day she swore that Ronald Grandison murdered Jason Darby." She laughed brightly, bringing her cup to her lips, sipping at the steaming brew. "When I say she swore, I mean violently, with arm-waving, shrieking embellishments. My, she could be volatile, most explosive and foreboding at times. She was a woman of very strong will and character."

"She *must* have been," Benjamin said rather vehemently.

"Of course, her brother had nothing to do with Jason Darby's death. He was flung against the rocks, I hear, which explained the bad gashes on his head."

"Do you think that his ghost truly visited Lady Darby?"

Agatha's eyes closed a moment. When she opened them a small fear showed itself. In a half-whisper, she said that it was not at all impossible to believe. For certain, Lady Darby had believed it. In the years before Agatha and Edmund had come to Yorkshire, it was Lady Darby's habit to keep a place set for Jason at her table, without fail. His clothes were regularly cleaned and pressed, his bed made up every day. According to old Cora, the housekeeper, his bed was mussed and required making every morning. The situation was very trying for house guests, who were forced to accept the fact that a dead man was in their company. Clarissa lived in every way, then, as a mistress of a manor with a charming husband at her side. He was with her, and they were happy. She would discuss with Jason the management of the estate, speaking to what others saw as only thin air, apparently listening, then passing on her husband's instructions.

"As his wife of one day, she inherited the estate?"

"Yes. There were no Darbys left to contest the inheritance. Jason left no will. Which is strange, actually, be-

cause it is said that he had a premonition of death. He most likely would have wanted her to have it."

"Then the Grandisons did, in fact, through inheritance, seize Jason Darby's estate, as the book contends."

"No. That's not the case at all," she replied urgently.

"On what facts do you base that statement?"

"It's merely vicious gossip that Lady Darby only married Jason for his estate, at her brother's instigation—proved by her loathing for her half-brother—it simply knew no bounds. Her entire life was spent in seeking a means of preventing Hedgewood Manor from falling into Grandison hands. Her hate for her brother eventually extended to include *all* Grandisons. Amazing to me, how a woman could despise her own blood and disavow a great heritage. Myself, I adore the very name of Masterson. My father was a—"

"Your mind; it's wandering again," Benjamin warned, draining the tea in his cup and returning cup and saucer to the low table separating them. "You have to admit, the estate is now in Grandison hands."

Agatha denied that, too, saying that he did not know Clarissa Grandison, who was in many ways a replica of her great-aunt. After all, the old woman had raised her from birth, and had to have had a strong influence over the child . . . There was a curious rumor about, Agatha recalled, not often spoken of now, since time had begun to erase the legends of Lady Darby; it was something about the old woman frantically attempting to adopt a child, being completely thwarted, and how she had raved in despair, rather insanely . . . Then, some five or six years later, she had taken in the orphaned infant of Malcolm Grandison. The child's name was then Marian, but she was rechristened Clarissa Darby, and accepted in the household as a Darby.

"But Clarissa is as willful as her mother was," Agatha said, shaking her head concernedly. "When she came of legal age, she had her name changed right back to Grandison. I swear, that is what killed the poor old woman, that and the announcement that her daughter would marry Ronald Grandison IV. The daughter seemed to be determined to do exactly what the mother feared most, to place the estate in Grandison hands."

"Yet you say it is *not* in Grandison hands. Why?"

"Once I knew Clarissa so well. We played together for many years. Our lives have taken separate paths, now. At any rate, she handles the affairs of the estate, refusing to combine her lands and resources with those greater hold-

ings shared by the Grandison clan. She changed after her mother died. She is a Grandison and proud of it, but there is something strange that eludes me. She refuses to break with Ronald, and continues as his fiancée. But it is said—probably mere vicious gossip again—that she has a prominent lover; his identity is a mystery."

Benjamin's eyes wavered from hers. He cleared his throat against a hand and said, "Lady Darby was a recluse, then, living insanely with the imagined shade of her dead husband."

"Far from it," Agatha exclaimed. "Edmund and I lived at Hedgewood Manor for two full years, while this house was planned by architects and built for us. We never sat at table except with at least a dozen guests. Old Clarissa had a passion for talk, adored company, good books and bad, music, art, and poetry; she even brought acting troupes and carnivals to Hedgewood Manor for galas."

"Amazing—for a woman so despairing all her days."

"But she was not despairing, John, not at all. How did I give you such an impression?"

"The clinging to his image, the dancing on the moors . . ."

Agatha smiled rather wistfully and insisted that those had been happy experiences for Clarissa, whose only hatred and hardness was for her brother and the Grandison name. That brother had died several years before Agatha and Edmund came to Yorkshire. Cora, the housekeeper, now gone to her maker, had said that there were only two really bad years in Lady Darby's long life. It began with the disappearance of Jason Darby's shade, spirit, whatever. "Where are you?" Clarissa was said to have wept, night after night. "Jason, oh! Jason, come back to me," she would cry. She took to her bed, finally, suffering a grief as severe as if she had just lost him—and he had been dead over fifty years. Some two months passed, and the family was prepared to bury her. She was seventy-six, fading away day by day. Then a strange visitor came to call, a gypsy woman, some sort of occultist. The woman said she had heard of Lady Darby's sorrow and had come to help if she could. For almost two years that gypsy lived at Hedgewood Manor; no amount of family indignation could persuade Lady Darby to oust the wretched charlatan. Gradually Lady Darby's health improved. Then one day she and the gypsy woman up and took themselves off to London by carriage, for an extended sojourn in a leased town house. That was when she discovered the waif she attempted to adopt.

"At least that's how *one* story goes," Agatha continued animatedly. "Others say it was *Jason* she was looking for—the gypsy woman having filled her head with some kind of nonsense about people returning to another life here after death, not going to Heaven as we all know to be true, but being born again. Now isn't that absurd! Lord Percival was furious with her, they say—at her age, carrying on like a lunatic about beginning a family. But you know, the ghost of Jason Darby never returned to Hedgewood Manor after that. I was never privileged to see the specter. 'He is well,' she'd say. 'I do miss him so, my Jason—but he is well.' Unnerving, I must say. As if she really believed he was alive somewhere. There's a word for that sort of occultism—what is it? Bother, I don't remember, but I remember how my hair would rise when she'd talk like that. Chilling. . . ."

A clock somewhere in the house chimed the hour of three. Agatha leaped to her feet. "Gracious! I have wagged my tongue for more than an hour and a half."

Benjamin rose immediately, smiling at her. "But I have been truly entranced by your tale."

"There is so much more I could tell you. Séances, mind you, and terribly bizarre things like that. Her obsession that Jason was going to return and claim his estate—in the flesh, mind you. But I must go. We will have the entire, long winter to talk and get acquainted."

She offered a dainty, slightly grimy hand. "A good afternoon to you, John. I sincerely hope you enjoy your stay with us. If I keep you like this too often, you will accomplish no writing at all. . . ."

Benjamin regretfully departed. But he felt well rewarded. His head was clear, the ache gone from his bones. How much better he knew her now, the specter of the sighs, though he did not even yet understand her curiously limitless spirit, or what she wanted of him. The part of himself that was Jason Darby, he was reluctant to think about; his spell before Squire Masterson last night had smacked of dementia, washing away all newly gained confidence in his sanity. Heretofore the transformations had come only when he was alone and particularly weary or distraught. If his consciousness remained tuned to Jason's character, no longer returning to reality, what could he hope for other than commitment to an institution? In this web of mystery that surrounded the dead Jason, he hoped to discover a key to the visitations upon

him. In the unraveling, either he or Jason would disappear, one or the other; he could not continue to exist as two people. Hellgate would be preferable to that, or an early grave.

By May the snows had melted sufficiently to allow riding and easy coach travel to Withernsea Village. Benjamin was in excellent health, having gained some twenty pounds, which he had sorely needed to fill out his habitually gaunt frame. The extra weight had padded out his cheeks, serving as a fine mask of his identity; spectacles were no longer required. The excellent food served daily, and long walks in the brisk winter air, had brought color to his face. Not since leaving Croydon for Cambridge had he felt so hale and hearty. The city and its filthy attics were not in any sense conducive to blooming health.

On a Sunday afternoon late in April, Benjamin and Agatha Masterson rode across the barren moors south of Withernsea Grange. Cliffs, not terribly steep, edged Bridlington Firth. They passed several gradual slopes of earth that allowed easy passage down to the rocky beaches, now entirely awash in a high tide.

"There," Agatha called over her shoulder, as she rode ahead of Benjamin. "The headland from which Jason Darby swam and subsequently drowned."

The chill wind slapped at Benjamin's face, stinging and penetrating. Refusing to look down where she pointed, he hauled on the reins and his mare veered away from the cliffs. Digging his heels into the horse's ribs, he plummeted toward Withernsea House, which was barely visible through trees.

"John," Agatha called after him, riding hard behind.

With a grove of trees enclosing him, shielding him, Benjamin drew in on the reins and came to a stop.

"John," Agatha protested, worried, reining in beside him. "What is it? You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

Benjamin laughed bitterly, throwing a leg and dismounting. The ground was wet, his boots sinking and sliding in muck. Agatha was immediately down and facing him. He avoided her examining eyes.

"John?—tell me," she pressed. "You act so strangely at times."

He met her eyes, then let his glance slide over her radiant face. The wind had burned her cheeks to a blushing rose; her lips were trembling, pink. She looked almost beautiful.

"Agatha," he said in a low voice, stepping close to her, to take her shoulders in his hands. "I am very fond of you. You have been wonderful company for me these months. But you mustn't try to pry into my secret thoughts, and my peculiarities. Accept me as you see me, if you can."

Her shoulders seemed to retreat under his touch. She tossed her head back, the plumes on her hat brushing his chin. He realized how short she was, being this close to her.

"Forgive me," she said huskily, shyly avoiding his probing eyes. Then she met his glance and she flushed, murmuring, "John, please."

He was hungry for human warmth, untouched, un-kissed, as he had been these long, lonely months. For weeks, every touch of her fingers, every scent of her as she passed him, had taunted and stirred him.

"You are twenty-two," he said softly, taking another step closer to her. "Why have you never married, Agatha?"

She spun away from him, laughing shrilly. "Oh, every man who has sought my hand hasn't met with Edmund's approval. He has grand visions of nobility of a sort, and —well, I haven't really cared enough for any of them to set up a row. If I did, I should have my way. Edmund is—"

He had stepped close again, taking her by the hand. "A kiss, Agatha, just one, to soothe this barren soul. I haven't been kissed in far too long."

"No, it isn't proper, John, it truly isn't."

He stopped her protest by quickly dropping his mouth over hers. She pulled her lips away, flinging her head aside, but he caught her tight in his arms and pressed his lips into the pliant flesh of her neck. Her hat fell from her hair, and she weakly protested, breathing harshly. Then her face slowly turned; their eyes met, clung, and she succumbed to his will, returning his kiss ardently. But when his hand moved around from her back to caress her velvet-covered bosom, she reared backward, her face red.

"John—you have gone far enough," she cried, accusingly.

"Forgive me," he said insincerely. "If you didn't want me to be charmed by your bosom, why did you wear that gown? If the bodice were cut any deeper—"

"It is the fashion," she snapped, reaching to rescue her hat from the mire at her feet.

"I am very lonely," he said, as she put a foot in the stirrup and hauled herself into the saddle; the stallion

danced with spirit, so that she was this way and that before him.

"Indeed," she said down to him. "Well, I am lonely myself on occasion, but my loneliness would not be cured by immoral conduct; the pain would only be increased by the addition of shame."

"My Puritan mother couldn't have said it better," he laughed. "Ah, the pity of it, all that a good woman loses to save her precious virtue."

"John Rollingsby, you're a scoundrel," she cried, digging her heels into the stallion's ribs.

With renewed cheerfulness, having noted her effort to suppress a smile, Benjamin leaped into the saddle and gave close chase. Withernsea House loomed before them, built so close on a cliff that the west wing seemed one with the face of the rock. On three sides of the house, lawns were beginning to show green; crocuses and jonquils sent spikes through the soft earth with a promise of spectacular color. Hedges were yellow-green with new shoots on their tangled branches. As Benjamin and Agatha approached the gate, he was close alongside her.

A crackling sound came, muffled, over the noise of pounding hooves. Benjamin cried out, as Agatha's horse stumbled with a gashing wound in its neck. The animal fell, and Agatha was spilled into a roadside shrub. Leaping from his mount, Benjamin ran to her, easing her out of the bush. Behind him rose the sound of a retreating horse.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worried.

"I—I think so, John," she whispered. Unsteadily she got up, crying out as she put her weight on her right foot. He caught hold and supported her. "Blast! I've sprained my ankle, sure enough," she complained impatiently.

Benjamin swung her into his arms and carried her toward the house, his face ashen.

"Someone shot at us," she whispered anxiously into his ear, holding him about the neck with both arms.

He did not reply, quickening his pace to rush headlong into the house.

"I say—what is this?" Squire Masterson said sharply, stepping out of his library the moment Benjamin entered the foyer with Agatha. "Have you broken a bone, Agatha?"

"No, I don't think so, Edmund," she replied. "Morgan was shot by—by a careless hunter—and I fell."

"A poacher! For the love of God," Masterson cursed, striding forward to take her from Benjamin, his face

showing that he held the same opinion in regard to the shooting as did Benjamin.

Edmund Masterson vanished with Agatha around the curve of the stair landing, and Benjamin turned into the library, in search of a stiff drink. He stopped dead in his tracks, before the vision in red that stood under the portrait of Clarissa Darby.

"Clarissa!" he hissed, without thinking.

"You know my name, sir?" Clarissa Grandison said politely. She snapped the riding whip against her red, flowing skirt, her emerald eyes flashing across the space that divided them. "Odd, since I cannot recall meeting you."

Painfully flustered, he couldn't find a word to say. His hands nervously sought a resting place, ending imbedded in the pockets of his breeches. He felt the wig heavy on his head. He knew she would recognize him. His eyes swept over her and a gnawing sense of loss wrenched his heart. She was exquisite, flame and ivory, snow-white flesh and hair of fire.

"You must be Master Rollingsby, Squire Masterson's protégé," she said with a wry twist of her mouth. "Have you lost your tongue, sir?"

"Forgive me," Benjamin said in a strained voice, "—but your resemblance to the portrait is quite striking."

She turned her head slightly to glance up at the painting, the plumes of her hat fluttering with the movement. "I gave Squire Masterson this painting," she said in a new voice, "because it made me uncomfortable. The eyes seemed to follow me about the house, you know. I despise replicas of this sort. Moslems have the right idea, I think, in believing that the soul of the sitter is captured in the likeness, to haunt the earth forever, never to find Paradise. Long ago Moslems made a law against portrait-painting, bless them."

Having gained some composure, Benjamin walked stiffly to the cabinet where a crystal decanter rested and poured himself a good portion of gin.

"*You are* Master Rollingsby?" she asked behind him.

Turning, the glass in his hand, he smiled as naturally as possible and said that he was.

"Curious, but now that I see you closer, you do seem familiar to me. Have we met, after all?"

"Not likely," he said. "Unless you frequent Bacon Street, London."

"God forbid," she gasped, laughing appreciatively. "By

your manner and attire, sir, I would not suppose you to frequent such a neighborhood, yourself."

"For the flavor of the people, you understand, in the line of art."

"Hmm. I should say art could well ignore the existence of such a rabble."

"Ah, you have met," Edmund Masterson said easily, as he swept into the room. His eyes held Benjamin's for only an instant, in warning—they would speak later of the incident.

"We had a difficult time at first; your protégé was quite flustered at seeing me under Mother's portrait. He knew my name, isn't that strange?"

"But I have spoken of you so often, my dear, it is no wonder he knew you."

"How very flattering, Squire."

Benjamin's eyes flashed from one to the other, watching their faces for a sign of personal involvement, for secret glances, but they were completely detached and formal.

"What happened to Agatha?" she asked. "I hope she is all right."

"Yes, a simple sprain. A poacher in the wood aimed badly and struck her horse with a shot. A day or two off her feet . . ." He shrugged to show his lack of concern.

"I do hope she will be able to attend my soiree on Friday next." She turned and smiled at Benjamin. "I would be most pleased if you would join Squire Masterson and his sister, Master Rollingsby. Friday next, at eight."

"I—thank you, but I . . ."

"He will be delighted, Mistress Clarissa," Masterson firmly interrupted. "It was very good of you to bring the invitation in person."

Clarissa moved smoothly toward Benjamin, her skirts rustling. She held out a leather-gloved hand, smiling warmly up at him. He took the hand with trembling fingers and leaned to kiss it lightly.

"You are quite handsome, do you know it?" she said flirtatiously.

"And you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he blurted out. "I shall probably love you to death, from this moment on."

She laughed delightedly and turned to give her hand to Masterson. "He's attractive and glib of tongue. I like him, Squire. I hope his poetry is as smooth as his speech. At first, I thought him a tongue-tied fool. . . . Good-bye; see you both on Friday."

When the door had softly closed behind her, Benjamin

strode to where Masterson leaned against the wall, apparently deep in thought.

"Squire, I can't go to that house," Benjamin said hotly. "Why did you accept for me, when you knew that I wished to—"

"Because you *must* go there," Masterson said emphatically, "and you know why as well as I."

"Someone shot at me!" Benjamin snapped.

"I believe you are correct," Masterson said roughly. "The thing is, what to do about it? But, at least, now I know."

"Oh? What do you know?"

"That Ronald Grandison is involved in some way, entirely separate from the interests of his family. You see, he knows who you really are; he had you followed to my house that first day. I saw his lackey skulking about on the street when I let you in, and again on the day we embarked on our journey."

"My God—why didn't you tell me?"

"He hasn't told Clarissa," Masterson said vaguely. "I wonder why?"

"She must have recognized me," Benjamin insisted.

"Nonsense. She is not that good an actress. I have known her since she was six years old; she could not have covered recognition from me. Your own mother wouldn't recognize you, I can assure you. Clarissa saw you only briefly when you were an emaciated clod, when you were not the finely groomed, mannerly gentleman you appear to be today. Your face is remarkably altered."

"Why didn't you tell me Ronald Grandison knew I was here? Letting me make an utter fool of myself with an alias—"

"It could only have made you more anxious. . . . Most peculiar, eh? Ronald keeping the matter a secret, when the whole clan is searching the entire nation for you. One can only assume that he has hidden other matters that might have been of great concern to his family—the fop!"

"You do not like the man, I gather," Benjamin said, searching Masterson's face.

"He smells bad, in more ways than one. I swear, he hasn't had a bath in all his life."

Benjamin laughed tightly. "I have not had many, myself."

"Nor I, but I hope I smell better than he. He sweats profusely under that brocaded satin in which he decks himself. I loathe the man."

"She is to marry him; could that be the reason why you

attempt to make him out guilty of intrigue, the basis of your hatred?"

"No, sir—it is not! He knows you are here. I made certain, by setting young Gudrid, Agatha's personal maid, to the task of extracting the truth from Ronald's dim-witted, amorous lackey, who was more than likely the man who shot at you today, though, lord knows, there will be no proving it. And Clarissa told me today that Ronald has told her his informants can find no trace of Benjamin Thorn."

With that, Masterson threw himself away from the wall, to pour himself a glass of gin. He took the glass to the fireplace and lifted it to the portrait. "To Clarissa Darby," he said loudly, with a flourish of the glass. "Long may she live!" Then he swallowed the gin in a single gulp. He whipped around to scowl across the room at Benjamin. "In life, she and I were good friends. In death, we have become enemies, it seems."

Startled, Benjamin said, "A curious remark, I must say." He eased toward the door.

"I have several excellent references on my shelves here, on the subject of psychic phenomena and the occult sciences. You might read them sometime; they're quite interesting."

"Then you do believe in the supernatural!" Benjamin exclaimed, almost accusingly.

Masterson's eyes were wide with a burning intensity. "I spent a good deal of my recent London sojourn in the company of Count Alessandro Cagliostro. I put the question of your bizarre duplication of Jason's papers to him."

"Cagliostro!" Benjamin exclaimed. "That charlatan—self-styled medic, magician, and scoundrel? A man of your intelligence—I cannot believe it."

"With the tongue of a fool you speak about something of which you are entirely ignorant. The man is far less scoundrel than adept, I can assure you."

His interest captured, Benjamin discarded his intention to depart, and stepped forward to stand before the man. "I have heard that the *Courier de l'Europe* is saying he is really Joseph Balsamo, a coarse thief disguised in a cloak of garish theatrics and contrived illusions of grandeur."

"I have witnessed his work among the poor," Masterson said earnestly. "He refuses to give his healing powers to the rich, who, he says, can afford the exorbitant fees of legitimate physicians. Not a penny does he charge, not a penny. And his cures are nothing short of miraculous."

"Black magic," Benjamin said distastefully.

"Black magic! What is that, eh? Anything not understood by simple minds is referred to as black, sinful, or unholy. Ridiculous. Cagliostro is no more deeply involved in black magic, if such a magic exists, than you, eh? . . . in your decidedly unorthodox communication with the mind of Jason Darby."

"You may be right," Benjamin admitted sourly.

"Would you care to explain to me your extraordinary transfiguration in the coach that night?"

Shaking his head vigorously, Benjamin said, "No, that subject is personal; my sensitivities are as tender in its regard as the subject of Mistress Clarissa is to you."

"Peculiar things have been happening in this house since your arrival. Sounds coming from your chamber, as if you laugh and speak with someone, yet no member of this household is with you."

"Like all writers, I am somewhat eccentric, in the habit of talking to myself. . . . If you'll excuse me, Squire, I am tired and would like to rest before dinner."

As Benjamin opened the door to go, Masterson said behind him, "Remember that Ronald Grandison knows you. He has, for a reason known only to himself, kept his knowledge from his family. Stay away from Agatha outside this house. I do not want her hurt."

"Yes," Benjamin said, closing the door behind him.

He moved quickly to the stairs and took them two and three at a time. Turning on the second-floor landing, he strode toward his chamber, but was brought up short by what sounded like weeping, coming from Agatha's room. He stepped to her door and hesitated, listening. The sounds were muffled but distinct.

"Agatha?" he called in a low voice, knocking lightly.

She called "John" in a choked voice, and he threw the door open, frightened by her hysterical tone.

"Oh—John," Agatha hissed, thrashing her head from side to side.

She sat with her back flattened against the headboard of her bed. The drapes were drawn at the foot, so that he saw her in shadow. She was terrified, speechless with horror.

He moved quickly to the foot of the bed, resting a hand on a post. "What is it, Agatha?"

She could only choke on stifled sobs, her eyes wide, staring at something behind him.

Benjamin turned around slowly, knowing what he would see. A vaporous substance shimmered near the fire, its living eyes full center. A muted shriek, then vicious laugh-

ter filled the room, and Agatha flung herself across the bed to clutch him around the waist.

He swept around and took her into his arms. "Shh, dear, it's all right. Nothing will happen to you. It's all right." He kept whispering comfort in her ear, stroking her hair.

"John—John, what is it? It—it came over the bed, and—I thought it was going to kill me."

"Shh, now," he urged, anger rising in him.

He whipped his head around, holding Agatha's face tight into his breast. She was flinging wildly about the room in the throes of temper. "Get out," he hissed, "get out and never come back. I loathe you, abhor the very sight of you."

"Jason—" she shrieked, broken-hearted. "Jason—Jason."

One of Agatha's riding boots was near his feet. He quickly leaned and caught it up, flinging it at the specter. It dissolved as the boot struck, only fading moans clinging to the air.

Agatha shook in his arms, weeping hysterically. He put his hands on each side of her face and made her look at him. Her checks were wet and very white, her eyes filled with horror. He kissed her eyes, her mouth, lightly, and pleaded with her not to be afraid; it was gone now.

For a long time he held her, until she had gained some control. She pulled away from him, remembering to be embarrassed by his presence on her bed. But when he made to leave, she caught his arm.

"Stay a little longer, please, John."

"As long as you wish." He smiled.

"What was it? You must tell me. I know I didn't imagine it."

"I can't," he said huskily, looking away from her.

"But you talked to it as if—as if—my God, I don't know what to think. It wanted to kill me, I know it. Eyes like fire, despising me . . ."

"You must put it out of your mind."

"Out of my mind? I will never forget it as long as I live! And I had—had the strangest sense of . . . as if I knew those eyes, had looked into them before, but they weren't filled with hate then, or murder . . . something. It was a shade, wasn't it, John? Wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," he admitted, his hands knotted into fists. "I am cursed by visitations. If you're to be attacked like this, in danger at every turn, I must leave this house."

"Oh no—no," she gasped. "I'll be all right . . . a matter

of getting used to the idea, I suppose. No, please don't go." Her face flushed and she brought up a shaking hand to push back a strand of hair from her face. "You see," she began with difficulty, "I have fallen in love with you, John. Isn't that—I mean, rather brazen of me; but it's true."

He met her eyes and saw the love she spoke of, soft as down, warm and tremulous. His heart sank. "No woman should love me, Agatha," he whispered. "I am—it is hard to say it in the right words—I am not what you were led to believe. Unstable, cursed by that fiend that attacked you, hounded by someone intent on murdering me; my life is a shambles, my future as unpredictable as the weather. Death is all I see around the next turn."

"I know who you are," she said urgently, reaching to touch his hand. "I went into your room some weeks past, to put fresh flowers on your desk, and there lay the manuscript of—" Her words broke off, as if she could not bear to speak of the book. "Inside the cover was a note addressed to Benjamin Thorn, from a publisher named MacKenna, dated before you came here."

"But why didn't you speak?" he exclaimed, shocked by her admission.

"I supposed that you and Edmund had very good reasons for the pretense."

"Yes, very good reasons. But it seems Ronald Grandison has known all along where Benjamin Thorn has been hiding. Your brother thinks it was he who ordered that shot at me today."

"Ronald Grandison!—shot at you?"

"I'd prefer not to talk about it. There is no proving it, that's for certain."

After a long silence, she said, "I will continue to call you John."

"Yes—you must."

"You needn't feel that you have to love me back, John."

"When I am free of this curse, Agatha," he said, meeting her eyes affectionately, "I will give thought to returning your love. For now—I should stay away from you, for your own protection. If I'd known how you felt—" He rose to his feet and looked down at her soberly. "Are you up to being alone now?"

"I won't sleep a wink tonight."

"Have Gudrid come in with you."

"Wonderful idea; I will."

"Rest now—stay off your foot. I'll come in before retiring."

He left the room and walked quickly and angrily down the stairs. He barged into the empty library, making a reckless search of the shelves for those books on occult science that Masterson had been so anxious for him to read. Though it was a well-arranged library, with volumes lined across the shelves according to subject, he found Masterson's occult collection practically hidden, where the bookshelves created a deep niche against the brick fireplace facing—only about a dozen books, bound in leather; the titles and subject matter could be discovered only after opening them. Cautiousness, indeed. Two were not even in English but German.

As he was about to turn away, discouraged, a white tooled-leather book, very small, caught Benjamin's eye and he jerked it off the shelf. Opening it, he found the title was in English: *The Eternal Identity*. He opened the book to the middle and contemptuously began to read:

"What thou art today, thou wast yesterday, as were you in days and experiences and ages and aeons past. Thy heritage is to know thyself and to be thyself in the continuing ever altering phases of thy existence which are called 'lives'; whether thou art manifest in material or ethereal form it is the same. There is not halting. There is not time. There is not death. There is but thy divine and continuous self; immortal...."

"Rot!" Benjamin exclaimed, slamming the book closed and shoving it back in its place on the shelf. "Superstitious rot!" He found it impossible to imagine Masterson reading such gibberish. As if one life were not enough—a man should ponder several, one following another? God forbid.

◆ CHAPTER SEVEN ◆

Friday came only too quickly. As the day progressed, Benjamin became increasingly nervous; it was impossible for him to eat, or nap in the afternoon. Agatha and Masterson having taken to their beds, he was left to himself. The servants had been given the afternoon and evening off, since no meal had to be prepared; the family planned to be gone until late in the night. The house was

silent. The sound of the distant sea could be heard faintly, and the bark of a dog from far off. Benjamin paced his chamber, tension building in him. Clarissa Grandison was on his mind, and he felt as tremulous as a schoolboy at the prospect of seeing her again.

He began dressing hours before it was necessary and changed his ensemble three times, ending by choosing a violet tailcoat and matching breeches, contrasted with a cream waistcoat and white linen shirt with a chin-high collar; voluminous neck ruffles took the place of a cravat. He wore white hose and white leather shoes, and chose a black cloak with a high beaver collar. Masterson had been most generous in having closets full of clothes tailored for him. But, as he stood inspecting his appearance in the full-length mirror, he forgot that Masterson had chosen his apparel, which slowly began to seem strangely cut. He liked the shouting color, but hardly knew himself.

Clarissa, he thought, his heart beating a little faster . . . He had not seen her since that meeting on the lawn, when she had come to welcome him home, recalling their brief acquaintance as children; she had only just returned from Paris herself. He would take her lovely hands in his tonight, brush shoulders with her in the dance: nineteen years old, and he was as delirious as a twelve-year-old at the mere thought of touching her; a little afraid, awed, all the threadbare agonies of a poet's fancies setting his knees to shaking.

A clock somewhere in the house chimed the hour of six, and he heard a woman's voice call someone named John. He paid no mind, giving his apparel a last careful inspection.

The door opened behind him. "John—for goodness' sake, let's be off. Why are you dallying so?"

In a gray haze, he followed her, knowing her and yet not knowing her. Established in the coach, somewhat apart from the others, he kept his eyes to the window, morosely silent.

"John . . . ? Are you well?" Agatha asked, concerned, after a lengthy silence.

"I think he's worried about meeting so many strange people," Masterson said to her. "Leave him be. He will be fine once the anticipation, which is always the worst of it, has become reality."

"Edmund—can't you do *something* about that shot that was fired at us?" Agatha asked. "After all, you *are* the law hereabouts."

"We will let Ronald play his hand," Masterson said under his breath, "and see what happens."

"You know what could happen," she hissed, leaning forward in her anxiety, hoping Benjamin would not hear. "He could kill poor John, before you're able to stop him."

"Nonsense. Be still. He is nervous enough."

"But I . . ."

"I said, hush. Ronald hasn't stuff enough in him to kill anyone, and I have a close watch on his lackey. . . ."

"Why? Why would he want John dead?"

Masterson sighed impatiently, glancing aside to Benjamin's grim face. "There was a will, if you recall. That will could not be found at her death, along with certain papers of the late Jason Darby. Since you were clever enough to discover who John really is, it must be evident to you that the Grandisons would suppose he might also have knowledge of the whereabouts of that missing will. Clarissa could lose the estate. If *she* loses the estate, *Ronald* loses the estate. Is it clear now?"

Agatha frowned and sat back in her seat. "You witnessed the will. Have you no idea where it is?"

"If I did, wouldn't I have offered it to the court, rather than just swearing to its existence? A moratorium of seven years was set by the Court. Six years and some months have passed. Clarissa is only custodian of the estate at present."

"But who else would old Clarissa leave her estate to?"

"I have no idea. She folded the parchment over, so that I could not see the names of her heirs. I read none of the text. I signed it after being shown only the document heading, 'Last Will and Testament.' "

"Is that quite proper?"

"A will needs no witnesses, my dear; she was simply being very cautious."

"If *you* don't know where the will is, John could hardly tell where it is hiding. . . . And, if the will is the motive, it could as well be any of the Grandisons who are shooting at John—even Clarissa, who is the one that would profit most."

"Hmm," Masterson muttered noncommittally.

She glanced to Benjamin's averted face. "I wish he would say something," she whispered.

"Let us both stop talking, shall we?" Masterson smiled patiently.

The road followed close along the cliffs edging Bridlington Firth. The sun set quickly and the sky blackened; no moon showed. Barren moors stretched to the west; clus-

ters of mist clinging in gullies to jutting rocks were swept like ethereal specters hither and thither by gusts of wind.

The coach veered away from cliffs, passing through Grimsby Wood. Soon lights were seen through the shadows. The coach rattled into the open, and Hedgewood Manor loomed before it, the driveway lighted by oil lamps set on stakes several feet apart. Carriages clogged the drive before the entrance; dozens of extravagantly attired men and women were milling about.

Benjamin moved in a haze, dumbly nodding as faces passed before his vision; Masterson was making introductions. Left alone for a moment, Benjamin scanned the magnificent foyer and he smiled proudly. The domed ceiling was frescoed; the chandelier was wrought in cut crystal and gold. Some of the best craftsmen of the sixteenth century had done the carvings and ornamentation. He sucked in a breath, as if home at last.

"Master Rollingsby—it was good of you to come."

He glanced around and met Clarissa's eyes, his legs turning to water. Composing himself, he bowed slightly and said grandly, "But I should be thanking *you*. I am very pleased that you could be here tonight."

A fleeting frown creased her forehead. Her red hair was coifed high on her head in twists and rolls, two coiled lengths falling over a bare ivory shoulder. Her bosom rounded over the deeply cut bodice of her voluminous pink and white ball gown.

"I think you must be the most beautiful woman in the world, Mistress Grandison," he said huskily.

Clarissa laughed, throwing her head back. "And you shall love me to death from this moment on, isn't that right? My, but you are repetitious, sir. —Ah, Lady Hornsby, so good to see you."

He looked after her with regret, then moved to follow. But Squire Masterson took his arm and led him toward the ballroom.

"When was the remodeling done?" Benjamin asked Masterson. "The ballroom is larger, has taken in the solarium and the gallery."

"I haven't any idea," Masterson replied, taking a firmer grip on Benjamin's arm. "Get hold of yourself, man—this situation is precarious enough."

"Ah, Lord Percival, good evening," Masterson said stiffly, bowing from the waist.

"Good evening, Squire, you are looking well. And who do we have here, eh? Your protégé, I wager."

"Lord Percival Grandison—John Lester Rollingsby."

Benjamin rudely examined Lord Percival's wizened face. He did not acknowledge the introduction by word or bow.

The old man sniffed contemptuously and turned his lorgnette upon Masterson. "Beastly night it will be, sir, beastly; I wish I had not come."

"Ah? It seems quite gala, your lordship."

"Listen to them, young man—just listen to them—all they can chatter about is that blasted piece of literary balderdash. It's the first social gathering since the publication; the titter, the titter . . . balderdash. Balderdash, sir."

"Yes," Masterson replied uncomfortably. "It must be very trying for you, your lordship."

Lord Percival's thin lips fluttered with words slow in coming. "I will simply have to put up with it . . . put up with it."

Easing himself and Benjamin around the old man, Masterson made a hasty escape. The musicians had begun to play; Clarissa and Ronald were leading the march. Sliding behind a chattering group of ladies, Masterson pressed Benjamin into one of the lounge chairs lined against the wall. Agatha swept up, limping only slightly.

Agatha stood before Benjamin, her smile vanishing at the vacant, confused expression on his face. His head lurched sideways as he attempted to see around her. She followed his glance and saw that he was watching Clarissa and Ronald as they gracefully stepped forward and back, turning and bowing.

"Clarissa is ravishing tonight," Agatha said, a note of rancor in her voice.

"Indeed," Masterson agreed, more emotionally than he had intended.

Benjamin suddenly reared to his feet, and, before Masterson could catch hold of his arm, strode onto the floor. He elbowed through the dancers until he was directly behind Ronald Grandison.

He put a heavy hand on the man's brocaded shoulder, pulling him aside. "Forgive me, Ronald," he said haughtily, "but I wish to dance with Clarissa."

"I say—" Sir Ronald cried. Then his eyes focused on the intruder, and his expression altered abruptly.

"Master Rollingsby," Clarissa complained lightly. "This is highly improper of you, even if flattering."

"What can you expect," Ronald snarled, "from the sort one finds in London alleys?"

"Ronald! That was unkind. Let's not make a scene."

"Sir Ronald, to you, *Master Rollingsby*," Sir Ronald

snapped, ignoring her. "If you don't mind. The name is Rollingsby, isn't it?"

Benjamin did not reply. He stepped forward, taking Clarissa's hands in his. His eyes darting about, he caught the step and proceeded forward, back, circling around her, leaving Ronald Grandison sputtering and alone on the floor.

"Oh dear, everyone is staring at us," Clarissa whispered as she came up close to him. "Shall I tell you a secret? I adore scenes."

"And I," he laughed. "Ronald deserved that. He is a terrible bore."

The music came to a halt, and faint applause was offered; couples began wandering aimlessly about the floor.

Clarissa did not move to leave him. She stepped closer, fluttering a white lace fan over the bridge of her nose, inspecting his face with searching eyes.

"In every way, sir, except perhaps your methods of gaining my company on the floor, you have the manner of a gentleman, one born well. How is such a bearing possible in one who claims a humble birth?"

"Can we be alone?" he pleaded, reaching to touch her hand. "For just one moment?"

"Perhaps," she purred; but, at his triumphant smile, added, "Perhaps later—much later."

She was away, sweeping across the floor, before he could reply or hold her back. He dejectedly followed her path, seeing no one but her.

"Master Rollingsby," Sir Ronald coldly spat out, blocking Benjamin's purposeful march across the floor.

"Ronald," Benjamin growled, eyeing the man severely. "I have despised you all my life. In this moment, my feeling is increasing by leaps and bounds. If you do not get yourself out of my way, I will aim a good blow at your receding chin!"

"Why, you—pretentious, insolent—upstart! How dare you speak to me in that tone!"

"Granted, I am not your equal, Ronald. I am by far your better. Now step away." To emphasize his determination, he swung a forearm against the man's chest and shoved the fop aside.

Ronald Grandison stumbled but caught his balance. He clutched Benjamin by an arm and hissed, "Do you think you have me fooled, do you? I am on to you. I'm no fool, sir."

"That is your trouble, Ronald. You simply do not

I know yourself as a man should; if you did, you would know that you are indeed many times a fool."

With that, Benjamin wrenched his arm free and strode once more through the milling crowd, his eyes searching the aisles that circled the floor, for her red hair. He came up sharply, as he thought he heard someone speak his name.

"Jason Darby," the woman beside him said again, quite loudly, to her companion. "When I tell Lydia Hodgkinson that I stood here, in the ballroom of Hedgewood Manor, where he and Clarissa danced—she will expire of jealousy, expire, I tell you."

"The author could be someone in this very room, Grace; no one knows who he is."

"Nonsense, dear, the book is his very diary, faithfully printed. Haven't you heard? Sir Horace Woolsey told me himself; he is in publishing, you know. Ah, there is Lord Percival. We'll ask him."

Benjamin was drawn by the curious conversation, following the women with a frown creasing his forehead. He was well aware of the significance of their gossip and at the same time bewildered by it. He stepped behind them as they forced themselves upon Lord Percival Grandison.

"Lord Percival, do clear something up for us, won't you?"

"Lady Grace, of course. What is it?"

"The book, your lordship—it is definitely a copy of Jason Darby's diary, isn't it?"

The old man's quivering mouth pinched, and he glared at the woman over his lorgnette. "My dear Lady Grace, you could not be more mistaken. The book is plain balderdash—slander, if you will. There was no diary to copy, my dear."

"Truly! Then why haven't you taken the upstart who penned the work before the magistrate?"

"Because we do not know the whereabouts of our culprit, dear lady. England is a large and populated country, eh?"

"One would think, holding a seat in the House of Lords as you do, that you could do *something* about it, Lord Percival. Your father, God rest his soul, must be turning in his grave—"

"My father, dear lady," Lord Percival squealed, his emotions getting the better of him, "worshiped the ground, the very ground Clarissa walked on. He accepted insults, abuse, what have you, all his days—all his days—from that woman, and he loved her none the less the day

he died. He was *not* a murderer—he would not have done such a thing to the woman he loved above all others . . .”

“Loved her above all others, you say? But she was his sister.”

“Fiddle-faddle!” Lord Percival wailed. “Woman, take your evil mind elsewhere—you are infuriating me. Have men never been known to love their sisters? Evil minds—evil, evil.”

“You needn’t be rude, sir” the woman gasped, haughtily turning away.

Squire Masterson came up behind Benjamin, taking him by the arm, leaning to speak close to his ear. “You’re making a damned fool of yourself. Come, sit down and relax a moment.”

Benjamin whirled on the man. “Who are you, sir,” he said low, “to presume to tell me I am acting the fool? This is my house. If you pester me again, I will have to ask you to leave.”

Startled, Masterson backed away. “Jason Darby is dead, man,” he hissed. “He is *dead*.”

“No,” Benjamin snapped, whipping around the man and striding away from him.

Masterson immediately found himself face-to-face with Ronald Grandison, who was slightly tipsy. Masterson’s mouth twisted distastefully at the sight of the man.

“Squire—I have met your, hmm, rather curious protégé.”

“Curious, I agree, sir,” Masterson said bitingly, “but he writes rather good sonnets.”

“Sonnets? I thought he wrote—other types of literature?”

“He is a poet, Sir Ronald.”

“Clarissa tells me you had no luck at all when you spoke with the villain in London. Simply would have no part of you, eh?”

“If that’s what she told you, why do you question me?”

“Question you? How could I question your unfaltering conscience, Edmund—a man who swears to the existence of wills that do not exist. Our villain has vanished as completely as the elusive will you *supposedly* witnessed, did you know?”

“No—did he?”

“Indeed, simply vanished into thin air. We’ve combed the land, combed the cities. But we’ll find him. There are those saying he is here in this house tonight. Exciting, what?”

"Certainly is. My blood is fairly spurting through my veins."

"Flippant you are, sir. But I may have a bit of a surprise for you, before this night is over."

"I'll wait with breath held, Sir Ronald."

"Clarissa isn't going to be happy with you, dear fellow, not a bit happy."

The fop pranced away, leaving Squire Masterson frowning soberly. Agatha came up beside him, worriedly meeting his eyes.

Benjamin found Clarissa on a balcony with a group of three couples. He stepped up beside her and said that the garden was lovely under the colored lights; would she care to walk? Not waiting for her reply, he put an easy pressure on her arm, leading her to the granite steps descending into the garden. She did not protest, except to say that it was quite chilly in the night air. Many pairs of eyes followed them as they moved under the balcony along a graveled footpath, passing other strolling couples. Benjamin knew the garden and lead her toward the summer house, far away from the manor and the sounds surging from its open windows and doors. No lamps lighted their way now; the blackness slowed their pace.

"Master Rollingsby," Clarissa at last complained. "Do you know where you're going?"

"I do," he laughed, hauling on her hand. "The summer house."

"But—how can you lead me to my own summer house, through my own gardens, when you have never stepped foot on my land before this night?"

Pulling on her hand, he whipped her around and caught her in his arms, laughing deep in his throat. "At last I have you to myself," he said, holding her loosely.

"Please, now—you are simply carrying this too far, sir."

"No man on earth has loved a woman more than I love you, Clarissa," he whispered urgently, letting her go as she struggled against him.

She swept away from him, to sit on a wrought-iron bench. The stillness of the night and the brisk wind was stimulating, and at the same time frightening, as if time had somehow retreated; they were isolated in space, entirely separated from the real world. He knew this was illusion, but was powerless to forsake it. He had come to

the end of the road he had followed with such desperation.

"Too quickly, I know . . ." he said to her. "But if I waited ten years to tell you, I would not love you any more than I did the first moment I saw you."

Clarissa's green eyes darted over the edge of her busy fan. "You overwhelm me, sir. And I am not being coy when I say it. Every woman dreams of being loved desperately and at first sight. How could I deny being deeply touched?"

He dropped to his knees before her. "Clarissa, I have waited so long. Forgive me if I seem insolent and overzealous."

"I forgive you," she whispered, leaning toward him as if entranced. "You are—the most, I mean to say—I have never met anyone quite like you. It's as if . . ." Her words broke off and she shook her head, confusedly.

He lifted himself to sit beside her on the bench, his eyes holding hers. His arms slowly moved around her and he drew her close, pulling her head into his shoulder.

"Clarissa—Clarissa," he gasped in her ear, "to hold you at last."

She moved her head so that she could look at him. The despair and love in his eyes took her breath away. "My dear man," she whispered, "you are sincere. I don't know what to say."

Then he kissed her. At first she withdrew, but the heat of his kiss quickly melted what remained of her will to resist. She returned his kisses, her fan dropping to the moist lawn at their feet, her arms flying around his neck.

"Please—" Clarissa cried, lurching back from him rather dizzily. "My guests—please, I—" but his hand caught in her hair and he put his mouth over hers, lightly, sliding, emptying her of will.

"Dear God," she gasped against his mouth. "What kind of man are you, to so drown my reason this way? I swear, it is as if I've known you all my life, or have been waiting for you all these years."

"You said those very words to me before—do you not recall?" he said huskily, putting his lips to her cheek, sliding to her ear. "'Jason,' you said, 'I have waited all my—'"

"Jason!" Clarissa cried out, wrenching herself free of his arms, "What are you *saying!*"

"Jason and Clarissa, forever," he said wistfully. "That is what we swore to one another."

Clarissa staggered to her feet, horror replacing the

softness that had shown in her eyes only a moment before. She backed away from him, a cry catching in her throat. "She said it again and again—all my life she hounded me with Jason—Jason." She choked on a sob, eyes widening. "She said it again and again, that he would come for me—I could not marry anyone but Jason. —
Nol You are *insane!*"

She ran, stumbling away along the path. Crying her name, he followed, but lost her in the dark. When he came under the balcony, she was nowhere in sight. His head reeling, he leaned against the stair wall for a long moment, then turned and took the steps, once again surrounded by strangers and searching for Clarissa.

Perhaps an hour passed before he saw her, at the top of the circular staircase. She wore a fresh gown, a deep red, and her hair had been newly combed. He watched her regally sweep down the stairs, his heart beating fast. Ronald Grandison waited for her at the foot of the stairs, and they talked excitedly. The man flung himself away from her, apparently infuriated.

Suddenly the musicians ceased playing and Ronald could be seen on the platform, calling for attention. He was very drunk.

"Ladies—and gentlemen," Ronald shouted, weaving before the company. "I have a most—most stu-pendous surprise announcement for you."

Following an angry impulse, Benjamin exploded forward, roughly shoving a path through Ronald's whispering audience.

At the foot of the platform, Benjamin shouted up at the man, "Get down from there, you drunken fool. How dare you disrupt this affair with your—"

"The Jason Darby Autobiography," Ronald yowled at the top of his voice, and the entire multitude fell silent. "We have discovered the identity of the scoundrel, the slanderer."

"Ronald!" Clarissa cried, now beside Benjamin. "Please, you don't know what you're doing. All these people. Do come down from there."

"He thought to slip away from us, but he was not very clever. I had the rotter followed, you see."

Squire Masterson came up beside Benjamin and leaned to hiss in his ear. "We had best leave while we can—"

"His name is Benjamin Thorn," Ronald announced, stumbling forward, an arm flinging down to point at Benjamin, "alias John Lester Rollingsby."

"We're in for it," Masterson muttered, his eyes darting to Clarissa's stricken face.

Benjamin leaped to the platform and threw a well-aimed fist against Ronald's sagging jaw, sending the man sprawling over the edge to the ballroom floor, not to rise soon again. Benjamin felt a thousand eyes on him and turned to face them. A sea of faces, staring at him. The silence was appalling. Clarissa was just below him, her eyes wide and glazed with a loathing that cut like a knife into his heart. He suddenly lunged from the platform and ran to the stairs.

"What is he *doing*; he's insane," someone shouted behind him.

He took the stairs two and three at a time, fairly flew round the second-floor landing, down the hall, across the gallery, into the east wing. He threw open the door of the room; the air inside was as musty as if he'd entered a long neglected tomb. He stumbled in the dark but moved surely, guided by what appeared to be several dozen close huddled fireflies, beckoning, sighing. His hands searched the wall until he found the catch, and the panel slid away to reveal the teakwood chest. Taking the ornate casket into his hands, he brought it up to his chest, breathing hard.

"Yes, Jason—yes," she whispered, and vanished from his sight.

Squire Masterson was the first to enter after him, with Clarissa directly behind, then another sea of condemning faces.

"By what *right*," Clarissa raged, "by what audacity, do you presume to . . . What have you there? What is it, I say?"

"Clarissa, be calm," Masterson said sharply. "He isn't well."

"Really! I never would have suspected it."

Masterson quickly stepped close to Benjamin and put a hand on his shoulder. "You have done it, my friend," he said in a husky voice, "This is what you had to do, to prove yourself to me . . . Give me the casket, please, Benjamin."

"He has no right to barge into my rooms like this," Clarissa seethed, whipping forward to stand before the two men. "I will not *have* it!"

Benjamin shivered. His vision blurred and he rocked on his feet. "Forgive me," he whispered, his eyes closing for a moment. "I am so—so confused, I—"

Masterson caught him by an arm as he fell forward, supporting Benjamin's weight.

"Give me that casket," Clarissa ordered, putting out a hand.

As Benjamin numbly pushed the box outward, Masterson caught hold of it with an aggressive lunge of his arm.

"Edmund!" she cried, appalled by his brutal attitude. "How could you do this to me? How could you!"

Masterson avoided her eyes. He held on to Benjamin with one hand, the casket with the other, and ordered the leering, whispering audience out of the room. Some were reluctant to depart, hanging back, hoping to hear and see more. Below, in the ballroom, the music had begun again. As the last elderly lady slidled out, Lord Percival appeared in the doorway, peering into the room through his lorgnette.

"Come in, your lordship," Masterson called. "This is of concern to you."

The elderly gentleman cautiously entered the room, his lips quivering with unspoken thoughts. Masterson strode across the room and closed the door; the chamber was thrown into darkness.

"For God's sake, light a lamp," Clarissa snapped in the blackness.

Before Masterson had found a lamp and could strike a flame, a dull thud was heard, as of a falling body. When the lamp dimly lighted the room, Benjamin was sprawled on the carpet.

"Is the scoundrel dead, eh?" Lord Percival asked hopefully, remaining near the door.

Masterson ran to Benjamin, kneeled down, and put a hand to his brow. "He is feverish, has fainted, I think," he said. With some difficulty he lifted Benjamin in his arms and carried him to the bed.

"Edmund, you must give me the casket," Clarissa pleaded, standing at the foot of the ponderous bed, glaring at the limp, ashen man outstretched there.

"No, Clarissa," Masterson replied firmly. "In my capacity as Magistrate of Hedgeborough and Withernsea, I must hold this chest and its contents as evidence. You see, it contains your mother's will."

"Ridiculous!" she cried, her voice breaking. "She left no will. Edmund, I am deeply hurt by your—"

"The will, you say?" Lord Percival squeaked from behind them, deep in shadow. "Burn it, man—and who will be the wiser, who the wiser, eh?"

"Yes, burn it," Clarissa urged emotionally. She swept

around the bedpost and caught Masterson's sleeve, her eyes blazing. "Edmund, I cannot lose my estate, I cannot."

Masterson's face constricted, and his hand flew up to cover hers where it rested on his arm. "My dear, you have known all these years that this could happen. You have held to Ronald as insurance, the substitute you would have to accept if the will was discovered and you were not the heir. The day has come. You were very clever; you stand to lose one estate, only to gain another through marriage. Why are you so distraught? You cannot lose, any way the will reads. —A pity I am not a nobler, richer man."

"That is unfair—"

"But true," he said bitterly.

"How can you be so certain it contains her will?"

"Because I have her letter, telling me that she had hidden it in this house, that Jason would come and find it, that only he would know where to look for it."

"Jason! Preposterous!" she exclaimed, whirling away from him. "Positively idiotic. She was deranged—God love her in Heaven."

"And this young man is deranged, I suppose, but he did exactly what she said he would do. How many times did she tell you, Clarissa, that Jason would come back—at least once every day of your life? You were to wait for him, hmm?"

"I will not discuss her fixation about Jason Darby," she snapped. "Why in God's name would she hide her will? She could as easily have left it for us to find."

"Oh?" Masterson asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Burn it," Lord Percival squeaked again from the shadows. "We will only claim insanity and reverse the blasted thing, reverse it easily enough."

"You might have burned it, Clarissa," Masterson said, "if it did not name yourself."

"I would have," she spat out, furiously pacing before the foot of the bed. "If she sent you a letter, she could have enclosed the will with it. You wouldn't have destroyed it, not you—who swears to love—" Her words broke off, her eyes darting to Lord Percival's obscured face.

"I don't think she trusted me that far, Clarissa, probably having noted a certain expression in my eyes when looking on her lovely daughter."

"Well, read it, then—let's have it over with."

"Before the court," he replied, shaking his head, "with all interested parties present. It is her will, my dear. She

had a right to name whomever she wished; these lands were hers to give."

"Balderdash," Lord Percival whined. "She was addle-brained, bereft—insane, I say."

"That you will have to prove beyond any doubt, sir. And I wonder why you both have assumed that she left the estate to a party unknown."

"Edmund," Clarissa said sharply, "she swore that she would disinherit me if I agreed to marry Ronald. I was only sixteen, so terribly contrary, young and foolish. I changed my name and accepted Ronald just to infuriate her, never dreaming she would carry out her threat to disinherit me. She cursed Ronald the night we told her of our betrothal. Lord Percival was there, supporting me in my defiance—and she swore to them that they would never have the estate. They fought bitterly. It was too terrible.

"Then, in court, you said that you had witnessed a will only days before her death, and my heart froze in me. I know—dear God—I am so certain I am not her heir—"

"I'm sorry, Clarissa—believe me, I am."

"You're sorry," she hissed, "bringing this—this *lunatic* into my home, playing this game against me. I'll never forgive you—never!"

His eyes revealing the pain her words caused him, Masterson turned from her to stare at Benjamin's waxen face. "She drove him here," he murmured thoughtfully. "It took over six years, but she succeeded."

"She?" Clarissa whispered, halting in her angry pacing to gape at Masterson. "What *ever* are you talking about?"

"In the flesh—she said. You can't have forgotten that, Clarissa." His face twisted into a scowl. "I'd say Jason Darby has returned, to claim his estate. And I wager he shall have it."

Part

TWO

◆ CHAPTER EIGHT ◆

A deafening black thunder. Overhead, moon-washed clouds rolled with the winds. There was sea spray like chilling rain against his face. A fierce demon rode from out of the wood, tall on a horse as black as the doom that bled his mind of hope—it was Death who sat the steed; fate, the relentless avenger. A brief vision; then warm green eyes, hair of fire, a sweetest face. "My wifel My wifel!" he cried . . . The sea, no longer below him but catching him swiftly as he fell, a mortuary. Her bed was soft; cold and limitless, gently she covered him, flowed into him. Suddenly irrational, no longer pitying, she threw him against rocky cliffs, dashed him against stone, beating him to death on the shore he loved. To death—to death, his lungs filling with the sea he loved.

"Sh, now," a consoling voice murmured from far off. Perhaps it was the murdering sea, in regret and guilt for her brutal act. "Quiet now, there is nothing to fear." But he was dying, leaving Clarissa inconsolable.

"Clarissa!" Benjamin called out, rearing up in the bed, eyes wide with terror.

Gentle hands touched him. He blinked, then blinked again in an attempt to clear his vision. Slowly Agatha's drawn face came into focus. "Agatha—" he said hoarsely, falling back against a mound of pillows. There had been tears in her eyes. "Agatha—why do you weep?" he asked, closing his eyes in weakness.

"You—" she began weakly, "you have been very ill. I was so frightened . . . for you. Forgive me, for showing you tears and not a smile . . ."

"Ill—?"

"Yes, for nearly a month."

His eyes flew open. "A month! That is impossible."

"A fever took hold of you and could not be broken. More than once—" Her voice broke, but she quickly regained composure. "More than once we thought to lose you. I am so happy to see you improved."

"I—I feel more worse—than better."

She smiled, moving to bring the down quilts up to his chin. "I will leave you a moment. Edmund will wish to know. He has been as concerned as I. He must send for the doctor to look at you."

She was gone before he could restrain her. He stared at the canopy over his head, contemplating the escape of an entire month. Nightmares. He recalled a macabre series of events that seemed more real than this awakening. This was the dream, that the reality. A horrendous four-armed, two-headed apparition dangling from a cliff edge, falling into black and empty space, never striking ground, never—a perpetual falling, screaming. Faces, voices, accusations and threats, love and hatred—confusion and, continuously, terror . . . He felt barely alive, bloodless, like a tree from which all sap had been sucked by a vampire disease. Indeed, he was ill. He wished that he could say to himself that it was good to be alive, but he could not; a deep depression held him like hands around his throat, his own hands; in fact, he wished that he had died.

Squire Masterson strode into the room, to stand somberly at the foot of Benjamin's bed. "By jove, you are out of it—at last!" he exclaimed, a smile cracking his face. "You gave us a beastly scare."

"I frightened myself the most, I think," Benjamin said listlessly, trying to smile.

"No more of this, you hear? We want to see you on your feet within the week. That is a command."

"On my feet," Benjamin echoed, feeling himself slipping backward into that bottomless, black pit.

"Agatha," Masterson called out. "Have Gertie prepare broth. He is weak; he must regain his strength. Quickly."

There was blackness; then he was swallowing warm liquid forced between his lips. It was all so indistinct. He was an automaton, reacting without conscious effort. Their voices were obscured by a cotton veil between his mind and the world. He ate and then he slept fitfully. When he woke, the room was bright with sunshine pouring through the windows. Birds chattered outside. He felt alive and this time glad to be so. Turning his head, he saw Agatha asleep on a divan by the fireplace; her legs were drawn up and she was hugging them and the heavy folds of her skirt with encircling arms. Her head had fallen on her knees, and her black hair was spilling over the armrest of the couch. How childlike she looked, scrubbed, rosy-cheeked—innocent. A warmth spread over him and he smiled as he watched her.

Agatha felt Benjamin's eyes on her. Slowly waking, she

raised her head and met his gaze drowsily. "Good afternoon," she said, smiling. Uncurling herself, she stood, exclaiming, "Gracious! but I have a dozen creaks. Imagine, falling asleep where I sat. I was daydreaming ... How are you feeling now, better?"

"Greatly improved, thank you."

"The doctor came while you slept. He said you will survive—to one hundred, probably."

"God forbid. I will settle for sixty, or seventy."

"Really? Not I. I shall live to be one hundred and one. Not one moment of life will I forsake, whether I creak or not, whether I am reduced to a condition similar to that of a dried fig. I shall savor every instant."

"Advice?" he asked, smiling at her.

"For what it's worth. Could I get you anything?"

"Yes! A bushel of food. I am so hungry I could eat the quilts."

She laughed. "There is no need to go to that extreme. Orders are: only soft foods for a few days, if you can stomach eggs, milk, and the like."

"My dear girl, as I said, I could stomach quilts."

With a smile she marched to the door where the bell cord hung. She hauled on the ribbon three times. "A signal. It should take no more than a few minutes."

"Come—sit beside me," he said, patting the bed with a hand.

She hesitated an instant, flushing. Shyly she stepped toward him, choosing to sit in the chair close by rather than on the bed. She held her eyes downcast as he kept a warm glance on her face.

"The last thing I recall," Benjamin said reflectively, turning his glance to the sun-bright windows, "is making a bloody fool of myself. Did I actually put a fist into Ronald Grandison's face? I can only hope it was just one of my nightmares."

"I fear not . . . you did, actually," she said in a low voice, watching her fluttering hands.

"My God," he groaned, shaking his head in disgust. "I was tossed out, I should imagine. Odd—I cannot recall anything after that. I struck him. I turned, saw all those faces. What happened next? When did I become ill?"

Agatha glanced to his face, quickly looking away again. "You collapsed, Benjamin, and—and we brought you home in the coach. You were near death the next morning."

"I must extend my apologies to Mistress Grandison. What a lout I was! She must think me a complete ass."

Agatha cleared her throat, obviously very much ill at ease. "I transplanted my camellias yesterday," she offered weakly. "The weather is remarkably balmy for so early in the year. We must ride again—soon, Benjamin."

Benjamin turned hard eyes on her averted profile. "Are you keeping something from me?" he asked suspiciously. When she bit down on her lower lip, refusing to reply, he said, "I notice that you call me Benjamin rather than John. Can I take it that my identity is so firmly established that the ruse is no longer necessary?"

"Ronald revealed the ruse," she murmured, "just previous to your striking him."

"Did he? I had no idea. Then the mystery is solved. I must say, that is a relief. Has news reached London, do you think?"

"For certain. Edmund has a mountain of mail for you, routed from as far as Paris. You are quite a celebrity."

"What manner of celebrity? Honored, or disreputable?"

"Both at once, I should say."

Edmund Masterson came into the room then, a large silver tray in his hands. He strode to Benjamin's bedside with a wide smile. "Can you sit yourself up, hmm?" he asked affably. When Benjamin was in a comfortable position, leaning against the headboard, the Squire snapped down the legs of a bed-tray, carefully placing it over Benjamin's lap. He lifted the linen napkins from the serving dishes, commenting, "Whipped eggs—they look delicious. Hot milk and honey—nauseating, but you are in no position to be particular. Preserves and a biscuit. A week hence and you shall have a slab of beef two inches thick."

Benjamin ate ravenously; the dishes were empty in short order. Feeling much stronger, his spirit improved considerably, he looked from the Squire to his sister, frowning. "Now, what is it you two are keeping from me? Tell me."

"If we are keeping anything from you," the Squire quickly replied, eyes guarded, "it is in your best interest. When your illness is completely checked—"

"Lord!" Benjamin exclaimed. "I couldn't have murdered the fop!"

Both Masterson and Agatha laughed heartily at that. The Squire shook his head in paternal chagrin. "You always think of the worst first. It would not occur to you that our secret, if we share one, concerns a matter beneficial to you, now would it?"

"If it's beneficial, there would be no need to be close-mouthed," Benjamin argued petulantly.

"My good man, I fear I must disagree with you. For example, I have known men to faint away on hearing that they are to become fathers. Good news can be as unsettling as bad, to an ill man . . . In a few days. Bear with us, please. You must get back your strength."

"Good news, you say?" Benjamin asked impatiently. "Squire, you'll drive me over the brink, if you persist in this—"

"Not a word, until you can walk downstairs unaided. When you can do that, I'll be most happy to fill your ear with the news. Meantime, settle your mind, and physical health will follow."

"You are suggesting my illness is of the mind sir?"

Squire Masterson sighed, a wry smile twisting his mouth. "How you do distort a man's words, Benjamin, reading into them all sorts of insinuations and threats. A fair heavenly day it is. Hear the birds singing! Think of the grass that's green, a host of yellow jonquils bending in the soft spring wind, the sea green, white, and blue at once under the sky; aspects of this world better than dark nightmares and obsessions of doom. You are far too overstimulated by self-contemplation. Forget Benjamin Thorn for the moment; allow him the peace he seeks."

"You are a philosopher, too, I see," Benjamin commented sourly.

"No, not a philosopher, merely a man more or less at peace with himself, entranced at the moment by the miracle of new life surrounding my acres. It is spring. The world is new. My spirits lift with the grass this time of year. And so should yours. You, too, are reborn. A whole new life is before you. That much I can tell you."

"A new life," Benjamin echoed skeptically.

"Rest now," Masterson said firmly. "I have work calling my attention. Tomorrow you might try to walk about the room a bit."

"Tomorrow," Benjamin snapped, "I will take the stairs and you will tell me the news."

"Perhaps," Masterson said, moving to take up the tray. "Give it a try, if you like. But don't be foolish about it. No need to crack your neck."

An irrational terror overcame Benjamin as he watched the confident, handsome gentleman walk away from him, vanishing into the hallway. He was being poisoned. The Squire was Clarissa Grandison's lover, and had him here to destroy him with careful doses of some deadly brew. Agatha remained in her chair. His eyes fell on her, examining her intensely. It was impossible—not Agatha—she

could not have knowingly spooned poison between his lips; her expression was utterly devoid of malevolence. Perhaps she was a victim of her brother's passion, unwittingly a party to it. How could she *not* know her brother was the mysterious gentleman gossip said to be Clarissa's lover, how? The Squire was teasing him with suggestions of good news so that he'd be off his guard. He could trust in no one, not even Agatha.

"Would you like me to read to you, Benjamin?" Agatha asked softly, avoiding his eyes.

"No," he snapped, then quickly added, in a more kindly tone, "I feel tired, I'd like to sleep. I hope I'm not offending you, but I'd prefer to be alone, Agatha. There's no need to keep your eye on me. I'll be fine."

A fleeting look of pain crossed her eyes. She rose to her feet, reluctantly moving toward the door. "I'll look in on you in an hour or so," she said, and departed.

Alone, Benjamin leaned forward, throwing back the quilts. He moved to swing his legs out of bed and was struck by a flash of light, then darkness washing over him. He fell back, breathing heavily. He had no more strength than a soggy biscuit. Helpless. They could do anything to him and he could not defend himself.

It was five days before Benjamin had strength enough to dare attempt the long, now seemingly treacherous staircase. It was late morning, the house serene. He held tight to the banister, cautiously taking a step at a time. His knees threatened to buckle under him again and again, but he pitted his will against them and prevailed. At the bottom, he leaned heavily against the banister, getting his breath. Dogs set up a row of barking and squealing somewhere outside; men's voices were obscured by the racket. With fortitude, Benjamin stepped away from the staircase, aiming for the library. He made it to the door and rested again. He thought that he should have eaten more of the food that had been brought to him, but then again he might be in his grave by now, having succumbed to poison. He could not shake off the certainty that he was surrounded by enemies set upon taking his life and all else he possessed. A hand on the latch, he threw open the door and faced an empty room. Feeling somewhat rebuffed, he entered, falling into the nearest chair. He felt eyes on him and turned his head to gaze up at the portrait of Clarissa Darby. That part of himself which was a stranger reeled within him, impulsive terror, anger, and love combining in

a singularly destructive thrust that tore at his innards. "What is it you want of me?" he hissed at the face in the portrait, meeting her shining eyes squarely. "You can see I'm already a broken man."

A door slammed somewhere in the house. Footsteps approached. Benjamin had left the library door ajar, and now he saw Squire Masterson stride past toward the staircase, dressed in riding clothes, a grass-green cloak thrown over his shoulders. Up the stairs progressed the hard-falling steps. Silence followed; then he came swiftly down again. Benjamin steeled himself for the confrontation.

"Ah," the Squire said, apparently pleased. "You did it; cracking! But you look exhausted. A drink? I think Roger would give his blessing to a small shot of gin."

"No. No thank you, Squire," Benjamin mumbled, eyes hard on his adversary. "I have come to hear the news you've been withholding from me. I must say, *something* is afoot; the way Gertie looks at me you'd think I was Johnnie the Highwayman, or Lord North himself. Difficult to define her dark emotions. Speak, and let's have done with it."

"You chose a bad moment for this," the Squire said uncomfortably. "This evening would be more appropriate. I'm not an idle man. This season of the year—"

"I can't wait until this evening, sir. For me, *now* is the appropriate moment."

"Yes. I can't blame you. It must be an extreme aggravation to you, this suspense—"

"Since the night I began the autobiography, I've lived suspended, breath held. I can suffer it, I assure you. To the matter."

The Squire sighed, glancing up to the portrait, then moving to hang his cloak on a hook and sit behind his desk. Reaching for his pipe, in his waistcoat pocket as always, he said, "Bear with me, please. I must begin at the beginning. There is much you do not know, about Lady Darby, about myself. I'm now prepared to be completely frank with you, Benjamin.

"As you know, no will was found at Lady Darby's death. I told you that I received a post containing not only the papers, but a letter. I refused to let you inspect the letter. Now, you will read it. But first, about Lady Darby. She was not an easy person to anticipate or comprehend; she had a mind of her own that moved in mysterious patterns quite outside ordinary reasoning—"

"She failed to inform you as to the whereabouts of the

will," Benjamin interrupted curtly. "I would suppose she anticipated that you would have given it to her daughter. True?"

Lighting the tobacco in his pipe, Masterson glared at Benjamin through a veil of white smoke, his eyes gleaming with an angry intensity. "Clarissa and I understand each other," he said tightly, biting hard on the stem of the carved oak pipe.

"Ah? But you deceived her, secretly held Jason Darby's papers, kept my identity from her. A curious manner of mutual understanding, I must say. I wonder why you brought me here, sir—your true motivations. According to Agatha, you're an extremely ambitious man, bent on increasing your fortune by leaps and bounds."

"Agatha talks too much."

"—For which I am grateful. I feel I have perhaps one friend, one only, your sister."

Masterson's eyes sparked. "Stay away from Agatha. You're not the right kind of man for her."

"Not noble, or not wealthy enough."

"Not at all. You couldn't have steered further from the truth. Frankly, it is your state of mind to which I object most strongly."

Ignoring the insult, Benjamin said stonily, "And I also wonder of which you are fonder: Clarissa Grandison, or the estate she holds. I distinctly recall your pleas that night, as you begged her to marry you."

"Benjamin! That is quite enough. If you came here to discuss my private affairs we will call a halt right now. If you wish to discuss yourself and the news I have for you, fair enough!"

"Forgive me," Benjamin said disagreeably. "Pray continue, Squire. What news."

For a long moment the Squire drew hard on the pipe, smoke billowing around his flushed face. When he had regained composure, he said around the pipe stem, "Let us go back to Lady Darby. I have never spoken of this to anyone. It is my suspicion that—that she did not die of natural causes. I believe she was . . . murdered."

"Murdered!" Benjamin exclaimed, lurching forward in his chair. His vision blurred and he rocked where he sat, as if he'd been told that his world had come to an end. "Lord, what makes you think such a thing? She was—old."

"For almost seven years, I have contained it," Masterson said softly. "Yes, she was very old, ninety-eight, and it was time for her to take leave of this world, but, as I told

you, she posted the papers just two days prior to her death. As magistrate of Hedgeborough, it was my duty to investigate such a matter—”

“Then why are you in doubt, almost seven years later?”

“Roger Smythe-Turner, her physician and my good friend, insisted that she had died of old age, no more. I could hardly cry murder. I kept my suspicions to myself, as well as her letter and the papers—waiting. The missing will was the key, I thought.”

“In God’s name, who would murder an old woman for her property, when it could only be a matter of weeks, or months, at any rate?”

“. . . If she intended changing her will?”

Benjamin squeezed his eyes closed against a wave of nausea. “Then it is a *double* vengeance she seeks, more to it than Jason’s murder,” he whispered, his mind awhirl.

“I could be mistaken, of course,” Masterson said unconvincingly. “I have argued it over and over in my mind, these years.”

“Will you show me her letter, please?” Benjamin asked emotionally.

Masterson unlocked a desk drawer with a silver key and withdrew a pale blue folder from which he extracted the letter. He studied it a moment, then held it out to Benjamin, who took the fine paper gingerly. She was close. He thought he heard her sighs echoing all about him. He turned his eyes up to the portrait and her living eyes flashed, as if to say, “Yes, Jason—yes.” He let his eyes fall down to the letter, with difficulty reading the palsied handwriting.

My dear Edmund,

With this letter come my treasures, my soul of Jason that has warmed me these many, many years. Guard them well. Don’t let them fall into destructive hands. Jason would not want Ronald to have them. Hide them, until he returns. Then there is my will, not here enclosed. Ronald despises me, and I—he—he is a fiend, murdering fiend. I told him, only this morning, I shouted it for the world to hear—never will he lay his vile hands on Jason’s estate, not while I live in this world, or exist in the next. I have left it all to Jason, my dearest Jason. The will is hidden, where only he can find it. Ronald will never appropriate Hedgewood—never. So guard Jason’s writings well, my friend, and don’t be amazed if I am dead before you receive this. Ronald is incensed. I have

seen murder reborn in his eyes. How he will rave when he discovers the will is missing. I shall laugh among them, terrorize them—as you well know how. When you find my Jason you will know him, for I will be with him, yes, with him, as ever, and he will receive back all that is his—his, that I have saved for him . . .

"As you can see," Masterson said, "she was lost in the past, dreadfully confused, lucid and demented at once. She saw Ronald Grandison as his grandfather, accused him as if he were her despised brother. But it is not wholly raving. Here, Benjamin." He brought a second, more lengthy document out of the drawer. "It is her will. Prepare yourself for a shock. I warn you, you will find this quite inconceivable, perhaps even appalling or frightening, but I assure you, it is a legal document, already accepted by the Court as incontestable. A charge of insanity was pleaded. For lack of corroborating witnesses, save Grandisons, to her derangement, the charge was judged invalid and the will probated."

The document was held out toward him. Benjamin did not take it; he stared at it, a sense of impending doom once again waxing violent within him. "I thought—the will was missing," he whispered, "It can't be the will . . . it's impossible."

"It was found a month past," Masterson said roughly. "You found it, Benjamin."

"I?"

"Yes. The night of Clarissa's soiree. You have no recollection of it, I know, but I was there as a witness. Take it. Read it. Better you receive the news from her herself, in her own words and hand, than from me."

Unwillingly Benjamin reached out and took the will in his hands. Vaguely he recalled a harsh whisper: Yes, Jason—yes. A familiar room, a secret place over the headboard of the bed. A casket held tight to his breast. He blinked his eyes to clear his vision, focussing on the testament.

I, Clarissa Darby, widow of Jason Darby, legal and sole owner of Hedgewood Manor and of all corporate interests which I fell heir to, on this 10th day of October, 1773, being of sound mind, however decrepit the flesh, herewith command as to the dispersal of my estate upon my death. All my worldly goods, estates, lands, moneys, interests, investments, and ac-

counts receivable, I leave in total to Benjamin Jacob Thorn, born in the borough of Croydon to Jacob and Bertha Thorn on the 6th of November in the year of our Lord 1752 . . .

The document fell from Benjamin's hands as he pitched forward. Masterson lunged away from his desk quickly to Benjamin's side, then eased him back into his chair.

"And you would have had me give you this news while you were ill in bed? Good news, you see, can be like a shot of lead into the midsection." With that, the Squire stepped to the gin decanter, poured a healthy dose into a crystal glass, and forced the drink into Benjamin's shaking hand. "Drink it," Masterson ordered. "It will warm your innards, prepare you for what is yet to come."

Benjamin poured the gin down his throat desperately, then asked for more. With another stiff one in his stomach, he let out a hissing breath and said, "I am mad, for certain—living a nightmare. This can't be. It isn't possible."

"I agree. Decidedly improbable. Someone said, I can't recall who, 'A dozen impossible things happen before I have opportunity to eat breakfast each morning,' referring, of course, to the unlikelihood of simply being alive, seeing, hearing, breathing, waking, and so forth. Impossible she should leave her estate to you? Yes. But fact, nonetheless, as awe-inspiring as the rise of the sun over the moor this morning. Your signature on a thousand and one separate deeds and assorted legal documents is all that is required and it is all yours.

"So you see, if I *were* determined to gain Hedgewood through marriage, I would be wooing you rather than Clarissa, who is at the moment in a state of shock equal to your own. Read further, do, and you shall see why Clarissa is so distraught, and why you were named sole heir."

Numbly Benjamin returned his attention to the will.

So that there shall be no accusations of a criminal nature pressed against said heir, Benjamin Jacob Thorn, I herewith attest to the fact that the man has not set eyes on me since the age of one year, when I was a frequent visitor at his home in Croydon, on visits he was too young to recall now. At that time, having grown quite fond of the infant, I proposed to his parents my wish to adopt the boy, to raise him as my son and heir, myself childless, due to cruel and criminal circumstances, old, and close to death. I was

refused, to my great sorrow, and took my leave, never to see the lad again. But I did not forget him, nor did I leave him to flounder in the relative poverty of his station. With this will I enclose a receipt of deposit to the Bank of England to the account of Benjamin Jacob Thorn, which sum he has all these years assumed to be a legacy from his grandmother. This much his people would accept, for his sake, a trust from which he withdrew the cost of his education at Cambridge and can withdraw some support in the years following. I have named Benjamin Jacob Thorn as heir to my estate for the reason that there is no other person to whom I can leave the holdings of my late husband, Jason Darby, since my adopted daughter, Clarissa Grandison, has forsaken all rights by insufferable actions that express an all-inclusive contempt and disrespect for all Jason Darby held sacred. Thus, I herewith state most emphatically and without remorse, influenced by no other party than she herself—to my daughter, Clarissa, I leave the name of Grandison; may she carry it with her to hell.

So that my daughter cannot claim she has been overlooked, in addition to the name of Grandison, she is to receive the sum of one pound sterling in cash. I render therefore unto Jason the things which are Jason's, and unto Clarissa that which is due her.

The will was signed by Clarissa Darby, witnessed by Edmund Masterson and one Cora Briggs. In a daze, Benjamin pushed the paper toward the somber Squire, as if to rid himself of it hastily, and with the hope that in the transmission from his hand to Masterson's it might lose validity, his existence thereby returning to proper balance.

"Clarissa has already vacated the house," Masterson said, a certain note of regret in his tone. "She is taking up residence at Briarmoor with Lord Percival. Whenever you feel up to it, you can establish yourself at Hedgewood Manor—unless you are of a mind to sell out and—"

"What—what are people saying?" Benjamin asked hoarsely. "Surely this has aroused great interest and speculation."

The Squire laughed sardonically. "The understatement of the age. News sheets have had a field day with it, from here to London. That the author of the notorious autobiography turned out to be heir to the Darby estate—sensational. Gossip in the villages is rampant. To some you are a hero, a poor lad falling on good fortune, a cracking

piece of luck. To most, you are the arch-fiend himself in disguise, implementing a Satanic spell over the doddering lady to your extravagant gain. It will not be an easy path from here on. It might be best to sell out and move on, considering—”

“No!” Benjamin said quickly, as surprised as Masterson at his compulsive rejection of the idea. “I—I will survive the accusations,” he added more calmly.

“You read her letter,” Masterson said uneasily. “She informed me that she had left it all to Jason, and it turns out to be *you* she named. ‘I render unto Jason the things which are Jason’s.’ Have you any explanation for this peculiar, shall we say, inconsistency? What is the nature of these spells that overtake you, causing you to lose control to the extent that you act as though you are Jason himself. Benjamin, are you Jason Darby?”

“Don’t be absurd! Are you mad?” Benjamin exclaimed. “Certainly, you’ve forgotten caution.”

“Here, in my own home, I do not deny my deepest convictions. I will say categorically, yes, I believe in the supernatural, in rebirth—in the presence of the dead all around us. Agatha saw an apparition that I believe was Clarissa Darby. If she haunts you, there are ways to dismiss her, and I would advise you to do so with haste. We can live in one world or the other—not in both at once. Only madness can result from consorting with earth-bound spirits.”

“Are we not *all* earthbound spirits?” Benjamin said mournfully. “Since Clarissa saw fit to give me everything I have dreamed all my life of possessing, I would be more than ungrateful to dismiss her as soon as I grasp the dream. Thank you for your advice, however—but my life is my own. If you will produce the necessary papers, I’ll put my signature to them. And, if you would be so kind, I would have you represent me in regard to another legal matter. When the estate has been fully probated, in my name, I would have you do whatever is necessary to change my name legally—to Jason Darby.”

“You’re not serious!”

“But I am. Clarissa’s fervent wish was that the Darby name carry on. It’s the least I can do, wouldn’t you say? I will have sons. Darbys will fall heir to Hedgewood Manor, not Thorns.”

“Fool! You will destroy yourself if you continue to encourage this’ demonic lust for a past that is lost and cannot be regained. You are living in the eighteenth century, in a new age, and must progress as an entity; this

kind of regression can be most dangerous. Your memories of the past are obviously *limited*, but sufficient to—”

Benjamin lurched out of his chair in anger. “You dare call *me* the fool, and follow the insult with the most malignant concepts ever conceived by deranged minds? —I was raised in superstition, a *Puritan* malignancy designed to strangle the mind as well as the spirit. I reject that philosophy, yet it holds me in many ways, I know. I prefer to think myself mad than to accept fully what my eyes see and my heart feels—her sighs, her very presence, abhorrent to me even as I succumb to her. I’ve learned to live with that much, but I refuse to believe, as categorically as you *do* believe, in any such poppycock as ‘The Eternal Identity.’”

Benjamin strode to Masterson’s desk, laying his hands flat on the surface, glaring at the man. “Yes, I looked through your collection of so-called scientific works and I found them to be books so devoid of the most ordinary common sense that even a *child* would see them for what they are—quackery. I have *one* life to live, sir—and I shall live it as I damn well please!

“The papers, if you don’t mind. I’m very tired. I need rest. Before the week is out, I will take myself to Hedgewood Manor and inspect my inheritance.”

His face flushed, mouth tight, Masterson removed stacks of papers from several desk drawers and threw them on the desk top toward Benjamin. “Excuse me, sir—you are *not* a fool, but a *liar*,” Masterson snapped angrily. “And there is no man more to be pitied than the one who lies to *himself*. Sign these papers and you will have it back. *Then* what will you do? She’ll be with you, never fear. But she cannot give you sons. —Madness! God pity you.”

◆ CHAPTER NINE ◆

“The Thorn in the Grandison backside” he was called contemptuously, by gentry and commoners alike, from Hull to Manchester and in all parts between. Called himself a Darby, he did, seen now and again riding hell-bent along the roads in his fancy landau coach with the Darby crest flashing bold at the curious watching him pass. Playing the nobleman, he was, as if he was true gentry,

equal to his betters that had him in their company only for the displaying of him as a curiosity. But he seemed not to mind, "The Thorn," accepting invitations on crested linen, sealed with the imprint of Jason Darby himself. Danced with the ladies, he did, with never a wince at the eyes on him, or the talk in back of him. He was a cool one. Only to his face was he called Darby—*Master Darby*: to the hatter, the clothier, to Lady Hodgkinson of Hull the Lancasters, the Duke of York;—he was *Master Darby* to them all, to which he took no objection. And why should he? some said. He was rich enough to buy the county—he could afford not to mind the wagging tongues and efforts to downgrade him by the preceding of his name with the address afforded a common shopkeeper or blacksmith.

Those who had wagered he would not last a half-year had paid their dues, though there was still some speculation that his doom would come. He was thriving, and so were his acres and fortune; he possessed the Devil's own luck in extravagant measure. Into the far hills of the boundaries of Hedgewood he rode one day, and soon after men and machines were set to the task of digging coal from the earth, burrowing deep into the hills for the black stuff that was sent from Hull in the holds of ships down to London. His flocks had multiplied, his grain fields were rich and fully harvested, while fields adjacent suffered blight and hailstorms—the storms seemed to halt just at his boundaries, as if they dared not trespass against the land of himself, *The Thorn*. And it was said, in cautious whispers, with prayers so that lurking demons would not hear, that Lady Darby still lived in her Manor, him keeping her company—for on many a night when the moon was full and the wild dogs howled on the moors, echoes of laughter could be heard and a terrible moaning coming straight from the house she'd willed him; evil goings on between the Devil and his mistress. And pity poor Mistress Grandison, grieving at Briarmoor, abed nearly a month of the shock, not yet entirely herself. She'd not been seen on horse or in company since that black day in Court, when Squire Masterson read aloud the damning will. The shame of it, and her so fair, possessed of a goodness of heart not found in many. Not a heart in the county failed to bleed for Clarissa Grandison in her sorrow, a bleeding that served to increase the general antagonism toward *The Thorn*.

Agatha Masterson stepped out of the coach before Hedgewood Manor on an afternoon in January, a shrieking wind nearly sending her sprawling into a snowdrift. She pushed herself forward, drawing her fur muffler up over her face. Clumsily, with mitten hands, she pulled the bell cord at the door, waiting, shivering. A sparrow-like woman dressed in drab brown, her dull brown hair brushed tightly back into a braided knot at the nape of her neck, quickly answered the bell, opening the door but a crack.

"Good afternoon, Mercy," Agatha said breathlessly, "Is your master at home? I was on my way to Withernsea, from Mistress Paine's, and thought to—"

"Miss Agatha," the woman said listlessly, showing a mild surprise as she threw the door open wide. "Come inside, before ya freeze yourself. Aye, 'ee's at home. In the solarium, I think."

Agatha rushed inside. "My gracious, such weather. I should have gone to London with Edmund, though I doubt the weather there is less inclement. How are you, Mercy? It's been a long time."

"Ah, I'm well enough, miss. Give me your coat, now, it's sopping wet. I'll inform the master you're 'ere. Take yourself ta the sitting room—ya know where it is, o' course."

Agatha frowned as Mercy walked away from her, wondering again why she had stayed on, not leaving with Clarissa. She was Cora's daughter, born in this house, and she had waited on Clarissa from the time Clarissa was an infant. No doubt she felt Hedgewood was home to her and could not bear to leave—understandable enough, Agatha supposed. Still, Mercy had always seemed so very attached to Clarissa. Curious. Shaking her curiosity from her mind, Agatha walked confidently across the foyer, entering the sitting room, where a delicious fire burned. She quickly moved to the hearth, holding out her chilled hands to the flames. She thought of how she and Clarissa used to sit at Lady Darby's feet near this very hearth, years ago, enraptured by the romantic stories that poured forth from trembling, gray lips for their delight. How handsome he was, her Jason—hair the color of wheat under a summer sun, eyes as green as the sea he loved, tall, straight of back, firm of jaw, with the grace of a woman and the strength of a stallion. Jason was all heroes rolled into one, without faults or cares—pure dream—and how Agatha and Clarissa had hungrily devoured that dream! When they were alone, with Lady Darby gone to

her bed, they would sit for hours creating imaginary situations in which, each in turn, they played the part of Jason Darby's love—swooning, sighing, whispering excitedly. Agatha laughed softly, shaking her head—what a frightful romantic she had been then, and still was, if the truth be known.

"Agatha—how nice to see you."

She whirled around, smiling stiffly. "And how good to see you Benjamin. I was at Mistress Paine's, for fittings, having new gowns made for the spring, and I thought to stop and say hello."

"I'm delighted," he said, moving to take her hands in his, examining her flushed face with probing eyes. "You look well. Edmund is in London, I hear."

"Yes, I expect he will return sometime late next month."

"Will you have tea? Really, I am delighted to see you, Agatha. You should come often. Tea?"

"No. No, thank you, Benjamin. I swallowed gallons at Mistress Paine's."

He frowned, biting down on his lower lip. Turning away from her, he moved to a cabinet where he poured himself a drink from a decanter of gin. "I would prefer you to call me Jason, Agatha," he said, lifting the glass to his lips and draining the lot with one swallow.

She was silent behind him for a long moment. Then she said lightly, "How can I keep it straight in my head, I ask you. You were introduced to me as John. I became used to that. Then I must become accustomed to calling you Benjamin. Now it is Jason. Really, is it necessary?"

He turned, eyeing her coldly. "Not necessary—merely preferable. I must get used to it, myself, you know."

"Why trouble yourself? Benjamin is a fine name. It suits you."

"Jason suits me *better*," he said, turning to refill his glass, and quickly facing her again.

"Jason, then. But I tell you it makes me uncomfortable. In this house, particularly." She moved to sit primly on the edge of a divan near the fire. "In a sense, he was alive to me in this room. In my youthful imagination—warm and close, terribly exciting. Somehow, your taking his name profanes that spirit—no offense intended. We loved him, Clarissa and I, when we were children. . . ." Her words trailed off wistfully, her eyes turning misty in reflection.

"Have you had an opportunity to see Mistress Clarissa of late?" he asked softly, stepping closer to her, his eyes dark.

"Yes, now that you mention it. I saw her only a fortnight past. I paid a visit to Briarmoor, at her invitation."

"She is—well?"

"Comparatively," Agatha replied, avoiding his eyes; a hardness in them frightened her.

"I would do *anything* to ease her pain," he said roughly. "You can't know the regret I have suffered in her regard."

"You could have refused the estate," Agatha said pointedly, braving his eyes, "on the grounds that the will was the product of madness, the estate rightly hers."

"Ridiculous!" he exclaimed angrily. "It is by *right* mine. Would Edmund forsake *his* holdings, to salve her grief? He would not."

"I only meant to say that you did not mean you would do *anything* to ease her pain. What you meant to say, I presume, was that you would like to do *something*."

"Exactly."

"But nothing can cheer her now—she is inconsolable. Clarissa loved Hedgewood very much."

"No more than *I*."

"Perhaps. Benjamin, you are looking thin. I—Forgive me, I simply can't think of you as Jason." She flushed again in extreme discomfort.

"In time you will get used to it. You needn't fluster, I shan't beat you for the slip."

Rising to her feet, she laughed unnaturally. "Well, I must be off, I fear. It's two hours to the Grange. I dare not put myself on the road after dark."

"But you only just arrived." He stood close, facing her, his eyes locked to hers. "I have missed your company," he said in a low voice, touching her hand lightly with a forefinger. "Stay over, Agatha. The nights are long this time of year, and lonely. We could share a meal and talk at length."

"I couldn't," she whispered, her eyes cast down.

"Ten empty bedchambers. Only myself and three servants. It's like living in a tomb . . ."

"Then why do you live here?" she exclaimed. "I do worry so about you—I . . ."

"Do you now? You love me still, in spite of my being a devil? Isn't that what I am said to be: the Devil 'hissself,' 'The Thorn'? Merely because I was offered a magnificent gift I couldn't refuse . . . Still, you love me, in spite of everything."

"That is unfair," she protested. "I confessed my feelings in a moment of—"

"Of forthrightness. Why are people so in fear of revealing themselves to others? I detest coyness, mannerisms. My dear Agatha, you are no coquette; your feelings are written on your face for anyone to read."

She blushed painfully, stepping backward to escape his overpowering masculinity. Strange, but her feelings this moment were strikingly similar to those enjoyed in this room before; it was as if he really *were* Jason, and she under his spell. Lady Darby had often described the sensation of standing close in Jason's presence as like being caught in a witch's spell: he rendered a woman senseless with but a glance, the scent of him stupefying, his maleness a perfume that set the mind reeling—he was quite thoroughly irresistible. But the fear Jason wrought in the breast was delicious; the heat following was all-consuming. They had loved on the moors, at the edge of the sea, hidden by tall grasses in spring fields, in this very room—mere death was no barrier. Since Jason was irresistible, she had been powerless in his company; she would have allowed him to murder her without a whimper, if that had been his inclination.

"Really," Agatha said weakly, "I must be off."

"It is only two o'clock," he insisted. "Another hour and you would still return safely before dark. What is it, Agatha? You're distressed in my presence. Have you turned cold to me, as has the world? You're leaving me entirely friendless. I've invited you and Edmund to this house on several occasions, and always you have excused yourselves on one pretext or another. Tell me what it is."

"It's never convenient," she replied uneasily, "Previous commitments have made it impossible—"

"Agatha!"

"The truth then!" she cried, turning to glare into the fire. "Edmund doesn't want me to see you. He—he knows my feelings, and has expressed his firm resolve that I rid myself of this—as he put it, this 'obsession.' You're not the right man for me . . ."

He stepped up behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Will any man be right, Agatha? Or does he see you as too good for the lot of us. You can't forever remain the unspoiled spinster lady, with dreams your single respite. Do you think me mad—unworthy of you?"

"I—I think you are—troubled, driven to excess. I know Edmund is right in saying I would be unhappy if . . ." She could not say the words; her face was burning.

"If you gave yourself to me," he said for her. His hands increasing their pressure on her shoulders, he leaned down

to put his lips lightly against her ear, whispering, "But you want to give yourself, or else why are you here now against his wishes?"

She shook her head in silent denial, ineffectually attempting to release herself from his hold. "Tell me," he said softly into her ear, "why you think I would make you unhappy."

"You are not—yourself," she murmured, "—a stranger I hardly know. I couldn't successfully come between you and—and she."

"She?" he said, bringing himself up, scowling.

"Edmund has told me everything," she whispered shyly.

He stepped back, moving around her to see her face. "How sinister that sounded. Pray, what has your brother told you?"

"I saw her with my own eyes, Benjamin!" she exclaimed emotionally. "You recall; don't deny it. You admitted being plagued by visitations. She, Lady Darby, has somehow taken possession of you, driving you to the extremes all Yorkshire has witnessed. My heart breaks for you, but—"

"So, I am condemned for being extraordinary, even by you," he said on a sigh.

"You don't deny it, I notice."

"No."

"Oh—Benjamin! Leave this house. Get a handsome price for it and forsake this nightmare! You are submitting to demonic influence—"

"Lord!" he shouted, throwing up his arms in anger. "Demonic influence. Clarissa—a *demon*? You knew her, loved her. How can you think she has altered from saint to demon as a result of merely passing from this world into the next! Utter nonsense, superstitious blather, Agatha. I thought you more level-headed."

"Edmund said he thought she might be satisfied once you discovered the will, established yourself here according to her desire—but it did not content her. She lingers on here, calling you Jason, I wager, insisting you are her Jason, until you have begun to believe it yourself. He is dead, Benjamin—dead. You can't finish the life he had no opportunity to live. You must live *your own*."

"I am living precisely as I choose to live," he said firmly. "All my days I dreamed of this house, that it was mine. As far as my eye could stretch from the headland, mine. I have it. I shall keep it, and my sons after me."

"That is *Jason* talking!" she cried. "She puts words into your mouth, thoughts into your head. Can't you see, she is

attempting to recapture what she lost so brutally, through you?"

"The words, the thoughts, were in my head long before she had an opportunity to take possession of me," he said in a hard voice. "Why me, Agatha? Can you tell me why she would choose me? That gypsy you mentioned . . . But still, why me? I don't resemble Jason Darby physically to even the slightest degree. I've had a letter from my mother, describing in detail Clarissa's visits to our home. She came out of nowhere, regal, commanding—directly asking to see me, their child. Awed by her queenly bearing, they were inclined to abide her constant visits, but, finally, they asked her not to show herself in the house again. It was at that time she proposed adopting me. Preposterous! *Why, Agatha?* Answer me that. Why me? If anything will drive me mad, it is this unanswerable question that plagues me continuously."

"Oh, Benjamin," Agatha sighed, reaching up to put her hands on each side of his face. "I wish I could tell you, but I cannot. I only know the things of this world and about them very little. If I can't so much as explain why grass is green and not blue or yellow, how birds can fly, certainly I'm too ignorant to attempt an explanation of your tragic dilemma."

"You're right," he said angrily, jerking his head away from her tender touch. "I have lost my *self*. Jason has overtaken me, no matter how loudly I protest. That which was a stranger in me, what I held to be my better half, is becoming all of me. I am not what I was—and never can be again. And I am not at all certain, now, that he was the *better* of the two, or that we ever were in any way separate . . ."

"You mustn't talk like that. You *can* regain your senses If only you would leave this house."

"Leave this housel In London—at Withernsea—she was everywhere with me after her death. As an infant I was punished for insisting my name was Jason. Whatever I am, whatever my fate, it is inescapable."

"No! Edmund says that it is possible to exorcise her . . ."

"Exorcism," he snapped, "I'd expect that of Edmund.

"You say you can't comprehend why grass is green. Then shall we conjure the Holy Spirit to exorcise its greenness, rendering it colorless to satisfy our ignorance by erasing what we do not understand? Shouldn't we also exorcise Jason Darby, otherwise known as Benjamin

Thorn, from this house? Is that what you want, Agatha—my destruction?"

"Oh, no."

"Then accept me for what I am, good or evil, or leave me be. If you can't come to me at ease, on my terms, don't come at all."

"Forgive me," she whispered, stepping back from him.

"No," he replied roughly, "It hurts too much to see love die for lack of understanding. I may be deluded, even mad, but you are a *prig*, Agatha, unduly influenced by your overbearing brother, wasting away like the bud of a rose that hasn't stuff enough in it to open its petals and bloom. Even in death Clarissa is capable of uncompromising love . . . There are all manner of ghosts, some on two feet *claiming* to be *alive* but unable even to go through the motions."

Agatha sucked in a breath, choked on a sob, and ran from the room. He heard her speaking to Mercy, the closing of the door, then the sound of horses' hooves, the rattle of carriage wheels, the coachman's whip snapping. He was alone.

Gin would offer its usual modest comfort, however, and he strode to the liquor cabinet, not bothering to fill a glass, but swallowing directly from the decanter. He was not truly alone; there was always Clarissa, adoring, sighing Clarissa. His head reeling, he suddenly threw the decanter across the room where it smashed to bits against the hearth, gin spattering into the fire, hissing ominously as it altered to become vapor on the air.

"Can I be of 'elp to ya, sir?" Mercy asked anxiously, from the open doorway.

Benjamin glared at her, noting the waspish look of her. Bloodless creature, all one color, a drab brown. Drab, dull, bloodless, a walking dead woman, mostly bones, a waist no bigger round than his two hands could encircle. "No! You certainly cannot be of help," he shouted at her, "unless there is a spark of passion under that flat chest that would bring you to my bed tonight."

"Sirl!" she cried accusingly, turning in a huff to make a hasty exit.

"Bag of bones!" he roared after her. "Damn you, with your constant wordless accusations. Go on back to her! Go on—if my presence here discomforts you so. Stinking bag of bones!—Send the lackey to the village. Tell him to bring me a willing wench, I don't care how used. You hear? Get me a live woman. Not a ghost. Something *real*. Real—I say."

He pitched forward, suddenly flat on his face on the floor, without the strength or will to rise. An appropriate position, he thought, for a dead man: laid out.

With the arrival of spring a peculiar alteration came to the atmosphere of Hedgewood Manor. A suspenseful silence filled the nights, broken by occasional mournful sighs and moans, as of a woman in some secret chamber suffering great distress. Unidentifiable footsteps were heard along the passageways. A moving light was observed, by every member of the household, passing through the galleria that connected the closed-off west wing to the main house. Dead Clarissa searching for her Jason, the servants whispered. Benjamin kept occupied throughout the days, riding his acres, personally directing the furrowing and planting, the sheering of the sheep, and commanding his overseers with an uncanny assurance. Work was a defense, an escape. But, inevitably, he ended each day in his bedchamber tossing fitfully on his bed, disturbed by her presence as never before "—Jason," her calls came, sharper, more desperate, as if she had lost direction and was unable to find him in the darkness. Or was she indeed set on driving him mad? The door of his room would suddenly spring open—though he had bolted it on retiring—raising the hair on his head, causing his heart to stop an instant in his chest. Eyes fixed on the empty passage, he searched for her glowing presence, to see only blackness. He would get up, dress, take a lamp and follow the sounds, but he never found more than dust and emptiness. Yet he felt her close, as always, sensing that she was in another rage; fighting some unseen adversary known only to her. Change. Indefinable—stark.

It continued this way until early summer. When he was at his nerve's end, considering desperate measures—vacating the house or calling in a man of God after all to clear the air of fiends—a night came of absolute calm, so still, in fact, that the very absence of the habitual disturbances was enough to chill him to the bone. The downstairs clock struck twelve and he was still awake, waiting for the uproar to begin. Thrashing over on his stomach, he took a pillow and covered his head, pushing it against his ears, cursing drunkenly into the mattress, "Damn you—damn you to hell, Clarissa." Then, very slowly, a wariness took hold of him, a sense of danger, of eyes on him, someone stalking him, close now. He threw away the pillow, lurching up and around to a sitting position on the bed.

"Clarissa," he hissed, his eyes fixed on the shining apparition hovering half in, half out of the room, apparently seeping through the wall from the other side. His senses numbed by gin, he squeezed his eyes closed, shaking his head hard to clear his vision. She did not vanish. She was in red, the same gown as in the portrait hanging over Masterson's mantelpiece, her flame hair spilling loose over her shoulders. She sailed on the air toward him, smiling and weeping at once. He sat transfixed, incapable of action.

"Jason—oh, Jason," she whispered, now at the foot of his bed. Was he delirious? "Don't leave me, my love, not now. I suffer a sense of doom, as if you will never return to me if you go. Please, Jason—I beg of you, don't leave me."

"Clarissa," he said, but was uncertain it was his own voice saying it, "how foolish you are. A swim. I only go to take my swim—not on a voyage to London."

She swept around the bed, throwing herself on him, warm and pliant, flesh and bone, more real to him than ever before. His arms closed tight around her, comforting, adoring. "My wife. How miraculous it is to say it at last—Clarissa, my wife. I love you, love you, love you. I will never leave you, my darling; not even death can separate us now. We are joined, for all time, in God's sight."

"Don't leave me—Jason, don't leave me."

He took her face in his hands. Her eyes were bright in the darkness, filled with fear and love. He slowly dropped his mouth, kissing her hungrily. She responded with equal hunger, pressing the length of herself against the length of him. He forgot where it was he had wanted to go—his trembling fingers clumsily worked at the back fastenings of her gown. She laughed at him, rolling away and quickly returning to him in the flesh, exploding into his arms, her mouth searching for his. Her body was hot against him, her breasts hard under his hands. Blindly he went into her, his hands buried in her hair, his teeth gently biting her sweet, pulsating neck. The delusion was so painfully real that the agony of it threatened to stop his heart; it was a kind of momentary death, expiring inside her as if she were a fire into which he had been helplessly tossed. In the haze of his expended passion and gin stupor, he heard her say something about wine; she would fetch some wine for them from the cabinet. He waited, eyes closed, only half conscious. She did not return. Jolted awake, he called her name. There was no reply. Then he screamed it,

"Clarissa—!" The salt taste of the murdering sea was on his tongue.

A soft tap came at his chamber door, a dull voice calling, "Sir? Can I 'elp ya? What is it?"

He sprang from the bed, fumbling with a lamp, dropping it with a crash to the floor. He managed at last to strike a flame and light a candle. Desperately he searched the room. Not a sign of her, of course.

"Sir? Are ya all right?" Mercy called again.

"Go to hell!" he shouted. "Go to bed, woman—I had a dream, no more."

Her mincing footsteps retreated; oppressive silence followed. Perspiration was wet on him, his limbs weakened, as if he had indeed spent himself with a woman. The scent of her flesh lingered on the air—but she was gone, vanished into the dark recesses of the past from which she had emerged. The candle flame flickered as if a wind blew against it, bending, then extinguished. A maddening flurry of agitation surrounded him, brushing against his bare flesh. In a rage of frustration, he burst into tears, like a small child in the throes of a temper. A grown man, reduced to tears. What had he lost? Only a dream—or his sanity? His sanity; he had lost that years ago; it could be lost but once and forever.

So it began, and so it continued for several weeks. For days she was nowhere to be seen: the house would be a-thunder in the dark hours, winds rushing into his chamber through closed windows, stealthy footsteps coming from the forgotten bedchambers on the floor above; thuds, moans, things passed through space as if tossed in a rage. Then, on a silent night, she would appear once again—reliving that fateful night, that final consummation, with the same pleading words and dread passion repeated—only to become mist and vanish, her sighs lingering on.

It was not until a night in late July that another change in the pattern occurred. There were nights of agonizing silence. He paced his chamber, waiting, unsteady on his feet under the influence of far more gin than he could admirably contain. He was drunk, sick to the depths. On a compulsion, he moved to the window, clumsily shoving aside the drapes to peer out into the moon-washed night. The far moors were illuminated by the eerie light; a ground-hugging fog swirled over stones and brush, mires and footpaths. Then, within a mass of unearthly, wind-swept mist, he thought he caught a glimpse of a wandering form. He lunged forward, his face pressed against the obscuring piece-glass, and his shaking hands cupped his

eyes. It was she, in white silk, the wind pressing the gown against her to outline the curves of her body, her hair loose and flying behind her. With a cry, he exploded into motion, running hell-bent out of his chamber and stumbling down the dark staircase—out into the soft night perfumed by the flowers of summer. Gasping for breath, he followed the paths toward the place where he had seen her, desperately calling her name.

"Ja—son," she cried, hollow, from out of eternity. "Ja—son. Where . . . are . . . you?"

His boot struck a stone and he pitched forward to lie flat out, exhausted, tears filling his eyes. Her calls faded; she was gone. A beast howled mournfully. There was a crackling sound, the crunch of small stones under a foot. Benjamin raised his head, his blurred eyes fixed on a dark outline standing in shadow just before him: there—near a huge black stone. She was not in white, and there was no flying red hair—it was a stranger. He had been led to his doom, to the feet of an assassin. Stumbling to his feet, he stood rocking, blinking. There was no protecting himself; he couldn't ward off a sparrow in this condition.

The figure stepped out of the shadow, toward him. It was a woman, peculiar—foreign. Her hair was hidden by a scarf. Her dress was bizarre, ragged, with skirts over skirts, colors clashing, spangles glittering about her wrists and many strings of beads hanging round her neck. She was not old or young, but of indeterminate age. A grim expression twisted her angular, swarthy face.

"Who—who are you?" Benjamin gasped, glaring at her. "Are you there—or am I so drunk that I imagine you. . . ?"

"So—" the configuration said contemptuously, "now we met, Hah-son Darby. Name Catalina, señor." She stepped closer, meeting his eyes coldly, her arms folded over her ponderous bosom.

"What—by what right do you trespass my lands, gypsy woman?"

"Same right to me you speak like snake; I choose, eh? Catalina come to warn you. Catalina know many things, so you listen. Day comes. Woman come. How you say?—spirit bad; mala. For you the sea wait, the grave. Leave this place!" With ominous arm-waving fury she screeched her rage at him now in her native tongue.

Benjamin squeezed his eyes closed a moment, and when he opened them again the apparition was gone. There was no sound of retreating footsteps. He had, in his stupor, conjured the vision of a gypsy, a gin monster, no more. But, as he stepped back, about to return to the house, his

eyes caught an object reflecting the moonlight. He leaned down and picked it up, gaping at the spangle in disbelief. A warning, and he hadn't understood much of it. No matter, his fate was determined. In the name of hell, what good were warnings at this point? He could not turn back. He could not forsake a life's dream. He held the silver spangle tight in his hand, as he trudged back along the path. Hedgewood Manor loomed before him like a mammoth sepulcher, its doors gaping mouths, hungry for his flesh. He could not enter. Turning himself toward the stables, he took horse and sped toward Hedgeborough and the Chelsea Inn.

◆ CHAPTER TEN ◆

Having spent a month in London, Benjamin returned to Yorkshire late in the month of September, far the better for the sojourn. By a stroke of astounding good fortune, the specter had chosen not to follow him, and he had spent thirty tranquil days, sleeping mostly, reading, even once again taking up his pen to scratch out a bit of prose. He visited MacKenna, who was crawling with joy to see him, going so far as to invite him to his home for a meal on a Sunday, where the Scotsman persisted in a most pointed questioning. "A fair bit o' luck, and a proper mystery, true enough—could ya not speak o' the secrets to a long and faithful friend?" Aye, a Darby he was now, and proud of it no doubt . . . The autobiography continued to sell well, though not to the extent of those first few months, and MacKenna was most anxious for another "bit o' literature" from the pen of Jason Darby, a suggestion Benjamin dealt with coldly by shaking his head. The collected royalties, plus bank interest, amounted to slightly over twenty thousand pounds, which sum Benjamin had placed in trust for the support of his now ailing father. He had not been able to bring himself to pay Croydon a visit. They were strangers to him, below his station. He had no desire to be clutched by them in stifling embraces. When he received a letter from Bertha Thorn relating the seizure Jacob Thorn had suffered, which took him from his shop and livelihood, Benjamin met his responsibility the only way he could, with money.

Never having intended to stay away from home for more than a month or two, and feeling renewed after one month away, Benjamin began to suffer a violent homesickness; the depressing nights and strange agonies were forgotten in his urgent wish to taste once again the sweetness of possession.

Arriving at midday, having forwarded no warning of his coming, Benjamin was startled to see a Grandison coach in the drive as his own carriage approached the house. Curious, and somewhat wary, he strode into the foyer, calling loudly for Mercy. There was nothing but silence. No one seemed to be about.

"Mercy!" he shouted, throwing off his cloak. "Damn your eyes, where are you?"

She appeared at the top of the staircase, extremely unnerved. "Sir—" she cried in a helpless tone, "I had no notion ya would be arriving."

"Who is here?" he called sharply. "A Grandison coach in the drive. Who?"

"She were only visiting wi' me a bit," Mercy wailed, coming down the stairs, her skeletal hands fluttering nervously with her apron.

"She? Speak out, damn you. Who, for Christ's sake?"

"I am here, Master Darby," a familiar voice said behind him. "But I shall quickly take my leave, rest assured."

He whirled about, and faced Clarissa Grandison, his breath catching in his throat. She met his eyes squarely, without wincing. He noticed she was more spare, with a tightness around her mouth. She was dressed in black, as if in mourning, as, in truth, she well should be. "Please," he said urgently. "Feel free to—to remain as long as you wish. You needn't rush off on my account."

"Mercy and I were always close," she stated coldly. "Forgive my trespassing, but I took the opportunity to spend a day with her in your absence."

"Trespassing! You're welcome here, please know that. I—I have not had opportunity to speak with you, since . . . will you stay? There is much I feel compelled to say, but my tongue is ridiculously tied at the moment."

"I hardly think there is anything that needs to be said, Master Darby. What is done is done and cannot be altered."

"My sympathies. I—"

"Your sympathy is the last thing I desire," she snapped. "Mercy, get me my things, please. You have done well. I congratulate you. I hear that you have increased

your inheritance considerably in the year and some months that have passed. Remarkable—considering."

"Truly!" he exclaimed. "My deepest sympathies. If there is anything . . . I can do, please call on me. I would like us to be friends. Why must we glare at each other this way? We were well met—that first day, at Withernsea."

"Thank you, Mercy," she said indifferently, drawing her fur-lined cloak over her shoulders and pulling on leather gloves. "One day, perhaps," she said without looking at Benjamin. "It's too soon, I fear. The pain remains sharp. Though it is she I should despise, it is difficult to place my hatred rightly. You are here, in my house, handy to my antagonism, a ready victim against whom to pit my anger. I am sorry. Good-bye. And my apologies for intruding on your home."

She was out the door swiftly. Her coach rolled beyond sight as Benjamin watched regretfully from the open door.

"Good to have ya back, sir," Mercy said hesitantly behind him. "You'll have your room readied for ya. Have ya had anything to eat?"

He turned and eyed the woman coldly; she retreated under his hard scrutiny, drawing into herself. "Why have you stayed with me?" he asked accusingly. He had never liked the woman, was always discomfited by her presence.

"I had no notion to be ordered about by the housekeeper o' Briarmoor," she replied quickly, rather vehemently, "When I've been me own agent here since me mother passed on, God rest 'er soul in Heaven."

"I see," he said skeptically. Then, on impulse, suffering some guilt for his irrational dislike, he said, "I must say, I can't imagine how this house would have fared without you. Expect a little extra in your pay, come the end of the month."

"I thank ya, sir," she said unenthusiastically. "Will there be anything I could do? Have ya eaten?"

"I'm not hungry, thank you. Go to your tasks. I'll take myself over the acres on an inspection. Where is Roark at the moment, have you any idea?"

"At the coal shafts, I believe, sir. A wall caved in, it did, trapped a dozen men—a week past it were. The men was saved and the fixing o' the shaft is his business now.—Ah, before I slip it from me head, there be a passel a letters for ya in the drawing room, including an invite to the Duke's ball come Saturday next."

"The Duke," he said, raising an eyebrow and making a face. "Still he thinks The Thorn interesting enough to

display like the horned, decapitated head of a slaughtered boar. But a bore I shall not be. Remind me, Mercy, to write an acceptance this evening and have it posted."

"Aye, I will."

"Mistress Grandison is once again meeting her social obligations, I take it?"

"I suppose so," she replied with apparent caution.

"Then she will attend the ball, no doubt."

"That I cannot say."

"Make certain, if you please. I wish to know."

"Aye," she said softly, turning quickly to hide a thin smile that widened her colorless mouth.

Jason Darby's grand coach drew up to the Mandrake Inn, in the town of York, late on the Friday preceding the grand ball. The best rooms were taken by notables already arrived from as far as Manchester and Newcastle, forcing him to be satisfied with a windowless, skylighted chamber on the top floor, reached by four dismal flights of stairs. Considering the fetid attic of those days not too long past, the accommodation was sumptuous in comparison, and Benjamin wasted no emotion in rancor. A pleasant fire was lit, the mattress was down-filled, the furnishings reasonably elegant. He deposited his carrying case and descended the stairs to take his meal, then immediately returned to take to his bed. He slept fitfully but as well as could be expected under the circumstances.

The next morning a steward brought him tea, rolls and preserves, which he barely touched. He was becoming anxious, his stomach fluttering miserably. It was not the contemptuous eyes which would be on him this night, the whispers behind his back, but Clarissa Grandison's expected presence that wrought the discomfort. He recalled another ball, leading her to the summer house, the breathless kisses she had returned. There was no longer any danger of his losing his senses, forgetting who he was. Only too well did he know who and what he was. And she, flesh and bone, all he desired in a woman—intelligent, well-born, beautiful, and sensuous. That she was apparently far from virtuous concerned him only a little, for there was nothing he detested more than a resolute virgin. Squire Masterson would also be on hand. Benjamin contemplated what the man's reaction would be, when his own pursuit of the lady became obvious, which it surely would in short order. He was done with ghosts; he had chosen her as the woman to bear him sons who would

inherit the earth to which he held claim. He felt certain of his chances. She had responded to his desire once, and would again, in spite of her lingering antagonism. Had she not said herself that her hatred was misplaced?

Benjamin presented himself early at the door of the Duke's fourteenth-century castle, dressed in high fashion; he wore a ponderous, powdered wig of the finest make, purchased while he was in London, a coat and breeches of white brocaded satin, silk hose, and bleached deer-skin shoes with jeweled buckles. The ladies milling about the palatial foyer might hold him in general disregard, but the look in their eyes as he entered revealed the fact that their contempt was ambiguous, containing within it some portion of admiration for that which was so contemptible, much as the moth might despise the flame. Confident in his masculine good looks, he smiled at the ladies, holding the eyes of each for long, suggestive moments and thinking that any one of them would lie with him if he offered the vaguest hint of such a liaison. His eyes cast about the domed, richly decorated foyer for that one face—but she was nowhere in sight. In one of the salons, perhaps. Absent-mindedly he passed in line, offering his hand to the middle-aged, bearded Duke and his Duchess, murmuring a banality when he was overwarmly welcomed.

Benjamin spied Squire Masterson standing in the archway of a salon and walked through a crowd of talking, overdressed people toward the man. "Squire, how good to see you," he said to the regally attired man, holding out his right hand in greeting.

Masterson turned, a cold smile on his face, and took Benjamin's hand. "Master Darby." His eyes withdrew. "You are looking well. How did you find London?"

"Unchanged, Squire. Squalid, crowded. But I did enjoy the sojourn, renewing old acquaintances. I had an opportunity to look in on Beverley Syndicate, in which I hold a large investment. Very interesting. Insurance is a fascinating business, and profitable. Of course, you well know, with your family in insurance for over a century. Where is Agatha? Surely she came."

"No—she did not. She's indisposed and unable to make the journey."

"Ah! Not serious, I hope."

"A head congestion, not at all serious."

"You came alone, then. We should have traveled together."

"I accompanied Roger Smythe-Turner," the Squire said, maintaining his cold reserve.

"Yes—the physician."

"The physician."

Benjamin suddenly turned, instinct telling him that Clarissa was present. She was on the arm of her uncle, Lord Percival, just greeting the Duke, with Ronald close at her heels, his nose in the air, his jeweled lorgnette held daintily to his myopic eyes. In voluminous yellow, she was exquisite, with a powdered wig covering her red hair and a diamond necklace high round her throat.

"I can only hope," Masterson said icily behind Benjamin, "that you will not repeat your previous performance here. This is no place for a fool."

Benjamin whipped around to make a sharp retort, but the Squire had his back to him and was striding away into the salon. "Insolent bastard," Benjamin muttered, infuriated; then he quickly calmed himself. He had no intention of forsaking etiquette. If she did not wish his company, he wouldn't press her. Contrary to the Squire's opinion, he was not a fool and knew exactly what he was about.

An hour passed before Benjamin approached his game. She was in animated conversation with several young ladies, all quite attractive. As he approached them, he chose one with striking blue eyes. Smiling, he bowed from the waist, holding the young woman's surprised, curious glance.

"May I have the pleasure, Mistress," he said grandly, ignoring Clarissa who stood so close that her skirt brushed against his breeches. "If this dance is not already spoken for by one of your many admirers."

Lydia Hodgkinson fluttered her fan over her nose, giggling foolishly and accepting with affected coyness. He kept a flow of conversational inanities going throughout the dance, deliberately flirting with her. When the music ceased, he led her back to her companions, noticing that Clarissa watched him closely as he approached.

"Good evening, Master Darby," Clarissa said insistently, as he began to walk away without acknowledging her presence.

He turned, feigning surprise. "Ah! Mistress Clarissa, I didn't see you—do forgive me. How lovely you look, if I may say so. Will you excuse me, I'm booked for the next dance with Heather Ramsey."

"Of course," she said, pursing her mouth indignantly.

Benjamin smiled triumphantly when his back was to her. She'd thought he would be stunned by her beauty, so that she could disdain him brutally when he once again fell over his feet attempting to gain her favors. How

mistaken she was must already be apparent to her. Before the season was done there would be many more such galas. There was time. Let her see how charming and how elusive Jason Darby could be. And so he danced with wench after wench, managing always to be within reach of her glance. Not idle, herself, much sought after, she was at his elbows again and again on the floor; he would turn, meet her eyes, and smile reservedly, moving on. Then, at the intermission of the dancing, with refreshments being served in the great dining hall, he found that the Duchess had had the sense of humor, or cruel bad taste, to seat him between Clarissa and Ronald at the banquet table. He blessed the lady's meanness, happily sitting himself down to await the arrival of his table companions. Stewards passed behind him carrying trays heaped with cold meats, fruit, sherbets on beds of crushed ice, breads, and sweetmeats of every description. He filled his plate, eating with enthusiasm. Soon he heard an ugly grunt behind him. Ronald Grandison had found his place-card. Benjamin glanced up to see the gleam in the Duchess' eye as the Grandisons hesitated behind The Thorn, dismayed considerably by her rudeness.

"Sit down, Ronald," Clarissa hissed. "We needn't humor her by showing ill ease. Sit—for Heaven's sake!" With that, she held aside her skirt, sliding into the velvet upholstered chair at Benjamin's right. "We meet again, Master Darby," she said, smiling stiffly at him for the benefit of the Duchess.

"I am charmed," Benjamin said, bowing his head to her and turning quickly back to his eating.

"I am *not* hungry," Ronald said petulantly, loud enough for all close by to hear. "If you will excuse me, Clarissa, I'll take myself to the smoking salon."

"You're excused," she said, not looking back at the man.

"Shall I move to his chair?" Benjamin asked her pointedly.

"No, that isn't necessary," she murmured.

"I'm certain it was an accident," he offered consolingly. "The Duchess was unaware of—"

"*Unaware!*" she hissed angrily. "She damn well knew what she was about—but she will not get satisfaction from *me*. If you'll chat with me, I'd appreciate it."

"Most happily, Mistress. And about what shall we chat? London, perhaps? The weather there was remarkably good this summer. I swear, we had five entire days of sunshine the month I was in residence."

"Really! London *is* so bleak. Still, I have been considering spending the winter at Briarmoor Town House."

"Ah? You find the winters of Yorkshire intolerable, do you?"

"Indeed, I do. What can one do, I ask you, to cheer the hideously vacant days, snow clogging every road, the cold seeping into one until the bones are iced. One can never be really comfortably warm for five or six months. In London, there are affairs to attend to; life does not come to a standstill when the seasons change."

"Yes, I see what you mean. But there is a kind of quiet serenity, if you will, about the winters of Yorkshire. A fire, wine, a good book—the pressures of existence lessened so that one gains a sense of tranquillity that the rush of affairs in other seasons precludes." He leaned closer to her and whispered, "Do you think we have impressed the bitch?"

Clarissa laughed impulsively, a genuine laugh that did much to convince the disgruntled Duchess that she had failed. "Your choice of words meets with my wholehearted approval," she said to Benjamin. "Ah, to see her homely face, if she heard you call her by such an appropriate term. That she is, true enough. Each of her children has a different father, a fact that surely cannot have escaped her illustrious husband."

"If we danced together," he suggested, as if it mattered little to him, "think of the extreme consternation she would suffer. If you can bear my company, I'd be happy to oblige you in gaining full revenge. They do expect us to brawl, you know. Shall we further confound the lot of them?"

"Yes! let's do. I have the fifth dance open."

"Excellent. We'll give them something to talk about throughout the cold, inactive winter."

"What do they expect, in the name of God? That I'll take a shot at you?"

"A discomforting speculation," Benjamin said, wincing exaggeratedly. "It's some time since a gun has been aimed at me."

She turned her head to stare at him. "You have been shot at?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. But not lately. I can only hope the culprit, whoever it was, now has nothing to gain by my death, with the estate solidly in my possession."

"Are you guardedly insulting me, sir?" she said with a fixed smile, her eyes turning cold.

"Not at all, Mistress."

"Don't—or we may brawl after all."

He laughed, a warmth flowing through him at the degree of his success. She would place herself in his arms in less than an hour. An hour—an eternity. Before the dance was done, she'd be well on her way to becoming mistress of Hedgewood Manor. He knew who he was, what he was, right enough; reality no longer escaped him, as it did in those first ill and confused months in Yorkshire. And he knew who *she* was, Clarissa Grandison, the adopted daughter of Lady Clarissa Grandison Darby. His mind held memories foreign to him; the sorrows, fears, and passions of a dead man were an inescapable part of his being, but Jason Darby *was* dead. A future lay before Benjamin, however brief or intangible. He desired Clarissa for who and what she was, not out of a compulsion to repeat dead history, a recapturing. He—alive, flesh and bone, a man of this century—required more than illusion; a loving woman, good, sane, and tangible, sublimely outside the walls of madness that had threatened to crush him. Suddenly he recalled that macabre confrontation with the gypsy woman on the moor, her words stabbing into his mind like a cold sword: "For you the sea wait, the grave." He shook the morbid recollection from his mind, refusing to accept the threat. Not once since his return from London, though it had only been less than a fortnight, had the specter returned to bring down the walls with her yowls of rage, nor had she quietly crept into his chamber to create an illusion of lost passion. Perhaps she had at last found peace, quiescent in her grave.

On a calm afternoon in the month of November, the sun affably shone with a grand-scale nonchalance as an ominous, unseen specter descended rapidly on the countryside. The specter was delayed winter, racing from the north at high speed, a black wall like a premature night suddenly obliterating the sun's grace, mutilating the land with a fierce attack that did not cease for eight days. Days of snow came, driven by maniacal winds, and followed by torrential rains designed to reduce the high-blown drifts to rushing, flooding rivers that carried everything loose with them in their course to the sea. The docks of Hull were battered down and washed out to sea. Bulkheads gave way. Hillsides collapsed, sliding down on villages and fields.

Through the long, nightmarish days of the storm, the

chilled gentry of Yorkshire found gossip their single respite and entertainment. The most common subject eagerly offered for discussion was the astounding reaction of Clarissa Grandison to the amorous advances of The Thorn. Hadn't she on five separate occasions danced only with him—to the extreme agitation of her betrothed, Sir Ronald? Imagine. Now who would have believed it possible that Mistress Clarissa, so strong of will, would be caught in the spell he attempted to cast on her, with his winning ways and handsome figure. She had canceled her plans to spend the winter in London, and rumor had it that the chain of priceless Oriental pearls she wore to Lady Hodgkinson's last-of-the-season affair had been a gift she'd accepted from *him*. Oh, he was a charmer—not a lady failed to take note of that,—but it was the Devil's charm, designed to woo and destroy the unwitting. Speculation ran high as to whether The Thorn was possessed of the Devil, or by the risen, revenge-seeking spirit of Jason Darby himself.

And the gypsies had returned. Not since the year of Lady Darby's critical illness, when the shade of Jason Darby was supposed to have forsaken her, had the band been seen in these parts. A sign. An omen. Not a soul was safe about the land as long as The Thorn lived at Hedgewood. This storm was proof enough. Not one could recall so fierce an attack of wind, snow, and rain. She of the fierce black eyes, the same one that Lady Darby had taken in, was prowling Grimsby Moor again, unaltered by time. Catalina, the gypsy, had returned; what could it mean? Sure enough, Lady Darby herself might appear, conjured by the gypsy witch, to wreak havoc at Briarmoor against her kin. Were the two of them, Jason and Clarissa, together again in that house, scheming for the destruction of the Grandisons? Would her own adopted daughter be the first to be taken, brutally murdered as *he* had been done in long ago? For a fact, he must have been murdered, as Lady Darby had so steadfastly claimed; who could doubt it now? Revenge was in the wind. The soul of Jason Darby would not rest until his vengeance was completed by the hand of The Thorn. —And what of Agatha Masterson? She was seen leaving Hedgewood of an afternoon when her brother was away in London, the winter past. How many other visits had she paid him to which no one was witness—at night, perhaps? Not a woman was safe. Any of them might be next to fall under The Thorn's lustful spell.

Benjamin sat through those days before a warm fire, wrapped in a plaid wool robe, knits on his feet, a book resting for the most part unnoticed on his lap. His thoughts roamed with the delinquent winds—it was easy to imagine what was being whispercd in awed tones. He would smile wryly, thinking he was the least satiated lecher in history, with only a ghost to feed his lust. A pity, but The Thorn was not all he was cracked up to be—truly a pity. He was forced to admit that he did savor his dis-reputation. Better to be slandered than unnoticed; at least he possessed some claim to fame hereabouts, which offered a modest inner satisfaction. Jason Darby, perhaps the most innocuous man who ever lived—all his short life the victim of cleverer men—had, on supposedly rising from the grave, attained a stature of consummate evil, compared with the Devil, no less. Hilarious. Benjamin would, at the thought, explode into laughter, throwing his head back, choking on amusement, tears falling from his eyes. A feather duster could destroy him, as if it were a shot from a blunderbuss to his vulnerable heart. Fearful, drunken, confused—and all Yorkshire had him clad in horns and a tail.

On the eighth day, the storm seemed to have not in the least exhausted its fury; winds wrenched trees from the earth, driving them like lances to hit mark against grain houses, cottages, and shuttered windows, as if to break down all barriers between hell and earth. By afternoon it was dark as night. Benjamin sat hunched in his chair, restless, his body aching from a week of merciless inactivity. Energy exploded within him, yearning to exhaust itself. The door bell sounded, a dull, echoing reverberation, unreal. He sat still, ignoring the insistent clang. No sane man would be out on a night like this.

"Sir?" Mercy said from the drawing room door. "'Oo could it be, at such a hour?"

"If you answered the summons," he muttered unpleasantly, without turning to look at her, "you'd find a quick answer to that question."

A long silence. "I dare not," she whispered. "Aye, I dare not. Nothing proper for the sight o' human cyes could be out there, I can tell ya. Ya could not stand in such a wind, nor breathe—the rain so thick in its coming down would drown ya in a lick—"

Benjamin jerked out of his chair, the wool lap-throw falling to the carpet. "You are peculiarly unfit, I must say," he said, scowling at the trembling creature, "for the

keeping of a haunted house. It's some earthbound spirit, I wager, seeking warmth at our fire. Surely even ghosts would not relish such a night." He brushed past her, muttering, "I'll answer the door like a common lackey, since you're so emotionally indisposed."

Thinking any sight, no matter how terrible, would be a relief, a goblin better than no company at all, he threw the latch and hauled open the door. Wind smashed against him; rain washed into his face, blinding him momentarily. He blinked, brushing a hand over his eyes, at last making out the figure on his doorstep. She stood tall, unperturbed, as if it were a summer day. She seemed barely wet, and her skirts did not move in the gale whipping past her into the house.

"I come," she stated frugally, stepping forward.

Benjamin gaped at the gypsy, automatically moving aside. She entered confidently, her black eyes darting about the shadowed foyer and fixing on Mercy, who stood trembling at the foot of the staircase.

"You!" the gypsy shrieked, raising an arm and pointing a jeweled finger at the intimidated servant. "Catalina no like."

Mercy didn't hesitate but scampered up the staircase, tripping over her skirts, with frightened screeches erupting from her scrawny throat. Benjamin couldn't suppress a laugh. "Well, gypsy woman," he said affably, examining the damp, filthy creature, "we meet again. Do you come to warn me of impending doom? Or merely to rob me of everything loose?"

She turned blazing eyes on him and vulgarly spat at his feet, then shouted viciously at him in Spanish.

He shook his head, laughing. "Forgive me, I don't understand—"

She spat out more foreign words, making a circle with her arms. When he continued to shake his head dumbly, she strode toward a door beneath the staircase and threw it open. A finger poked at her bosom, then, jabbing pointedly into the room, she made her intention quite clear.

"You—wish to sleep the night here?" he asked in amazement.

"No! Catalina stay—one moon, two moons."

"But—this is preposterous! You walk into my house as though you own it. You are possessed of extraordinary gall. One night, no more. Understand?"

"Catalina stay," she yowled. "*Stupido!* Protect you, Catalina."

"I need no protection!"

"Ach," she snarled, then with balled fists struck herself in the midsection, groaning. "Malestar," she said, in a tone of voice that left no doubt as to her meaning: he made her sick to her stomach. "Buenas noches, señor," she growled, turning her back to him, stepping into the dark bed-chamber and slamming the door closed in his face.

"For the love of God," Benjamin said aloud on an outrush of breath. "A gypsy has come to live with me." He shrugged, thinking he would have her thrown out in the morning. Only the Devil himself would toss her out on a night like this, not fit for man or gypsy. He was possessed of an ounce of charity. One night. What harm could she cause, in a single night?

◆ CHAPTER ELEVEN ◆

Dawn came; a cloudless sky canopied the inundated land and a spectacular sun rose, spreading warmth that brought out the populace like moles from dark burrows. Benjamin woke to the distant sound of birds chirping and men's voices from the fields. With a cry of delight, he leaped out of bed; he dressed hastily and rushed down-stairs with the idea of taking a quick meal and then getting out on his horse to spend his energy under the sun. But Mercy grimly awaited him at the foot of the stairs, fully attired for a journey and with carrying cases stacked about her feet.

"What is *this!*" Benjamin exclaimed, scowling at her.

"I will not remain in the same 'ouse wi' that creature, sir. I plan ta take me leave, if ya will."

"Nonsense! The house fairly trembles with the clatter of ghosts and demons, and not once have you ever complained, calm as the Virgin in heaven. Now, a harmless gypsy woman drives you to this extreme? Utterly ridiculous."

"She be a—witch!" Mercy wailed, a gloved hand fluttering to her mouth, "We're not safe in our beds, the likes o' her under our roof."

"I'd intended throwing her out," he said angrily. "I dislike this sort of thing, Mercy. You are in effect directing me as to whom I may or may not invite as a guest in

my house; you've forgotten your place. Go. If you can't abide the woman, I don't care. You're *not* indispensable here. . . . Do as you like."

"But—sir!" she exclaimed, a bright fear behind her eyes, and no little surprise.

"That is my final word. *I* will decide who inhabits the guest rooms, not my housekeeper. If you decide to stay on, see that the woman has a hearty meal served in her room. I'll spend the entire day out; don't expect me for dinner. I have a notion to take a meal at the Chelsea this evening, to ride back along the Firth. —Well, have you decided?"

She gaped at him for a long moment, then began to pull off her gloves nervously. "Aye. I cannot go—I cannot."

"I thought not. —See to my breakfast, at once. I'm in a rush to get out of doors."

As Benjamin was eating creamed eggs and biscuits and washing them down with several cups of tea, the gypsy woman eased into the dining room, a thin smile cracking her full lips. "A good morning to you, Madam," Benjamin said cheerfully. "You slept well, I presume?"

She nodded sourly, standing arrogantly at the opposite end of the long table, glaring at him.

"I thought to toss you out," he said lightly, "but I have changed my mind. Remain, as long as you like. . . . Tell me, could you be the mysterious woman who kept Lady Darby company in this house for two years?" When she nodded, continuing to glare, he added, "I wager you barged in as aggressively then, as you did last night. She had lost the ghost of her husband. Did you by chance root him out of the eternal mists with your gypsy tricks? And pray, how many pounds did you steal from her as fee, hmm?"

"She—here," the woman said, squinting her eyes and twisting her mouth into sinister lines. "Catalina see, with own eyes."

"Lady Darby? Here? Ah—imagine that. I shan't sleep a wink tonight, for dread."

"No. No sleep—this night," she agreed, nodding her head knowingly. "Womans—come."

"Do you fear the dead?" he asked curiously, around a mouthful of biscuit.

"No."

"Nor I."

"No the dead. The living, eh? are ones to fear. The living."

"I couldn't agree with you more," he said vehemently. "Perhaps you can tell me why Lady Darhy chose me as her heir, since you were with her up to or just previous to her first visit to Croydon."

She shook her head hard. "No! How you say?—confidence. Lady swear Catalina to confidence—no tell—never. No good, you hear. Better this way. Catalina protect from bad womans."

"Clarissa? Bad?"

"*Si*—very had."

"I fear you didn't become closely acquainted with your hostess. She was not and is not anything but good. Confused, perhaps, living in the past, unable to let loose of a tender connection briefly enjoyed, but—"

"No no, señor—other one."

"Other one?"

"*Si*. Two. The womans two, *si*?"

"You mean—two Clarissas?"

"*Si*—*si*."

He frowned, rising to his feet. "You're warning me against which one, may I ask?"

"Ah, the living. The living we fear, *si*—the living."

"Ridiculous!" he shouted. "Clarissa Grandison is—is—"

"*Stupido!*" the gypsy exclaimed, throwing up her arms.

Turning heel, she stomped from the room, the jangling sound of spangles and beads echoing back as she proceeded up the staircase, the sounds fading from his hearing when she had progressed as far as the galleria connecting with the west wing.

Shrugging, Benjamin promptly left the house, walking briskly toward the stables. He was brought up short by the sound of a horse at gallop. Turning, he saw the kitchen boy heading at a fast clip toward the road that followed Bridington Firth. Curious . . . he did seem in a beastly rush, as if he were a courier entrusted with a vital, secret document. Benjamin speculated on the significance of the lad's mission—a shortage of potatoes in the kitchen, perhaps? An urgent need for an unguent to salve a burn on the cook's thumb? Or, more likely, the spreading of the word about the land that Catalina the gypsy had returned to Hedgewood Manor. He laughed, continuing toward the stables, breathing deeply of the sharp, washed air scented by the salt sea nearby. His boots sank deep into mud, which had a delicious scent of its own.

He rode hard, inspecting the damage to his far and near acres; it was not as catastrophic as he'd expected. He then turned on the road to Hedgeborough. Four hours of

drinking at the Chelsea, a hearty meal of roast mutton and boiled potatoes, and he was off again for the return ride, following his favorite course along the cliffs of the Firth—a brilliant green under a luminescent setting sun, white-capped and deep—a fitting grave for a man of seafaring ancestors. Hugh Darby had been buried in the green; Jason Darby, too. The sea waited, called in a thunderous voice as he sped past along her shore—and he laughed at her. Not yet. Another day.

Just as Benjamin turned rein, positioned directly east of Hedgewood Manor, he thought he heard a baleful cry above the pounding roar of the surf. He hauled in, his mount rearing and dancing in a circle. The cry came again, from below a rock ledge. He leaped from his horse, running toward the pitiful sound, like that of a woman in pain and fear. At the edge, he placed his hands on a large rock, leaning over to look down at the wave-washed shore. She lay in a crumpled heap, her riding gown torn and twisted about her legs. Shocked, he scrambled down the rough slope and was quickly at her side.

"Clarissa! What's happened?" he shouted against the howl of the sea, gently taking her shoulders to turn her over.

She moaned, her bruised face dropping aside over his arm. "I—my horse threw me," she whimpered. "Careless—I brought him up too sharply—at the edge. My leg—I'm afraid it's broken."

Benjamin glanced up to the ledge, wondering if he could manage to carry her to the top over the ragged, slippery stones. No, he would have to fetch help. He told her what he must do, rushed off, and leapt on the stallion to race toward the house for assistance. Half an hour later, a basket of twined rope, in which the wounded lady had been gently seated, was arduously raised, with two men pushing her with their hands and two others hauling on ropes from above. She was quickly taken to Hedgewood and put to bed. Benjamin had already sent for her doctor. Mercy fussed incessantly, tearful and pacing, until Benjamin lost his temper, ordering her out of the room till she could contain herself.

"I am so sorry—to trouble you this way," Clarissa whispered, in great pain.

"Nonsense," Benjamin exclaimed, moving to dab tenderly at the bleeding scratches on her cheek with a damp cloth. "Lie quietly. Don't talk. The doctor will come soon."

"This—this was mother's room," she murmured, glanc-

ing around her, "After she could no longer take the stairs."

"Yes. Shh, now."

"She died here—in this very bed. I—how depressing."

"You're only bruised," he said emotionally. "Don't depress yourself with thoughts of death."

"Have you ever *wished* to die?" she asked, closing her eyes, tears spilling over her cheeks.

"Many times," he admitted huskily. "It's common to all of us under great stress, I'd say."

"Why did she despise me so—why? I loved her, I truly did. I was so young, you see, unaware of the pain I caused her by my independent ways. If I could go back, I'd act so differently—so differently—and she'd have died at peace."

"I believe she was *never* at peace, Clarissa, from the day—the day *he* died."

"True, I suppose," she said on a shuddering sigh. "But—"

"No buts. I insist that you rest; stop thinking and torturing yourself with regrets. What is done is done."

"She'll never let it be done—never. In death she haunts me, accuses me, despises me. Since *she* can't find peace, she'll never allow *us* any peace. I wish that I—were dead, that the fall had killed me." She began to weep hysterically, her head thrashing from side to side on the pillow.

Compulsively Benjamin fell on her, drawing her into his arms, holding her head into his shoulder, rocking her as if she were an adored infant in desperate need. He breathed comforting words in her ear, a hand caressing her tangled hair. She clung to him, unable to control her despair, choking on sobs, her tears wetting his shirt, his flesh, penetrating to his heart that melted for her.

"Clarissa," he whispered, holding her tight. "It will come. The day *will* come, I promise you. They cannot keep us apart. Man or God—cannot keep us apart. Please, don't weep, it breaks my heart." She stiffened in his grasp, but did not pull herself away.

When the doctor entered, the scene that met his eye was quite a shock to him; Clarissa Grandison in the arms of The Thorn. They broke apart quickly, she falling back against the pillows. Benjamin was told to leave.

A hasty examination was made. Her left ankle was swelling badly, a severe sprain, and she had apparently cracked a rib. It was impossible to move her in a jolting coach; she would be forced to remain at Hedgewood at least a fortnight.

"Not here," Clarissa pleaded with Benjamin, after hearing the verdict. "Not in this room. Isn't there *some* way to

take me upstairs, to my—to the room that once was mine? I beg you; not in this room, Jason!"

"A board," the doctor suggested tonelessly. "But take extreme care, Master Darby. I will call again tomorrow. Would you have me send word—to Briarmoor?"

"No, I have already sent a man on horse," Benjamin said. "What can we do for her, to ease her pain?"

"Not a thing, I fear, except give her a potion to help her sleep. I'll leave a packet with Mercy. A good day to you, Master—Darby."

With Roger Smythe-Turner gone, Benjamin stood at the foot of her bed, warmed by the sight of her there, hoping she would never leave.

"Ronald will create a frightful row," she whispered, a thin smile twisting her pale lips. "Wait and see. Before the day is out, he'll storm your ramparts, cursing and sputtering."

"Why do you suffer him?" Benjamin exclaimed. "He's a fop, an unmitigated bore, half as intelligent as a fruit fly."

"Really," she protested mildly. "How can you say such things about Ronald? Not true at all. He is quite devoted to me—kind and generous. I could do worse—much worse."

"No—you could *not*," he fairly shouted at her. "Even Masterson would be preferable, I should think."

Her eyes darted to his face. "Squire Masterson! Whatever made you bring up *his* name?"

Benjamin flushed, looking away from her wide, wondering eyes. "You haven't been seeing him," he said uneasily, "since he presented the will in court."

"You are an outspoken man—you don't care how deeply you wound people with cruel words," she said in a breaking voice, her head dropping aside.

"I loathe the man, for having loved you."

"No more . . . than I despise myself, for *not* loving him."

His head snapped around; his eyes met hers. "Not—loving him?"

"Never. We met on occasion, secretly, but it wasn't as you believe. Edmund was content merely to be with me. He wished to marry me. I never could accept him, and told him so many times; however much affection I had for him, it was not that manner of affection."

Overjoyed, Benjamin smiled widely at her, then turned and strode out of the room to fetch a proper board on which to carry her to her room on the second floor.

Late that same night, Benjamin lay restless in his bed.

The room was chilly, with winds yowling outside, seeping through minute seams in the window casings to cause a flutter of the drapes. The fire made no advance against the falling temperature. Clarissa was asleep, Mercy keeping vigil on a cot close to her bed. Ronald had not, as Clarissa expected, stormed his ramparts. The gypsy woman hadn't shown her face during the uproar of Clarissa's arrival.

He damned the nervousness that kept him awake, the rampant visions filling his head, conversations between himself and Clarissa—what *he* would say to her on proposing marriage, what she would say in reply. Then it came—a sigh, too familiar, agitated, like rustling leaves being shifted by a breeze. "Jason—oh, Jason." He stared straight up, to the canopy overhead, refusing to acknowledge her presence. The corner of his eye caught a glow, moving along the window wall. "Ja-son—Ja-son."

"Go away," he groaned, "I no longer wish to live in the past, Clarissa. I am alive. You are *dead*. I must live—understand that! I cannot continue to relive it, again and again. Leave me be, damn you. Go to your grave and remain there. The past is dead. I no longer love you!"

A frantic shriek—and he whipped his head around, lurching to a sitting position, staring at the illusory glow, now stable near the door. Slowly, fury intensifying her power, she began to take form. "Dear—God," he hissed, a hand rising to cover his mouth. She was a withered, bent hag, her eyes on fire. A skeleton barely covered with gray, leather-like flesh, writhing, her bony fingers reaching out to him. Clothed in red—a blood-red velvet gown; hideous. "No—" he cried, covering his face with his hands. "Time could not have *done* that to you, Clarissa—so beautiful—so lovely my heart would stop beating when I looked at you . . ."

"Ja-son," the apparition cackled, not a voice at all, a witch's frog-throated speech that contained within it the echoes of hell. "Beware—Jason. Beware . . ."

Appalled, he threw his weight across the bed; he clutched hold of a silver candelabra and threw it full-force at the specter. With a painful moan, she dissolved to vapor before his eyes. But her fury remained, and all night things flew about the room, crashing against the walls, her temper uncontained, brutal, allowing him no sleep at all—as the gypsy had predicted; she had said a woman would come.

Benjamin hovered nervously outside the door of Clarissa's chamber the better part of the following morning. Mercy repeatedly insisted that Clarissa was asleep, opening the door at his successive soft tappings and hissing her urgencies to allow the poor thing a bit a rest. Late in the afternoon, the doctor's coach drew up before the house. Not alone, Roger Smythe-Turner was accompanied by Squire Masterson and his sister. Taken aback by the unexpected call from the Mastersons, Benjamin met them cordially, rushing down the staircase with hand outstretched.

"A pleasant surprise, Squire," he said, shaking the man's hand.

Then he turned to Agatha, meeting her guileless eyes; again her emotions were written on her face. "Agatha, my dear, so good to see you," he said, his eyes saying much more, chiding her for her excessive submission to her brother's will and suggesting the delights forsaken as a result.

"We heard of Clarissa's terrible accident," Agatha said, faltering, "—and simply had to pay our respects."

"Of course," Benjamin said warily, meeting the Squire's guarded eyes.

"If you'll excuse me," the doctor said, "I will look in on my patient, and then, perhaps, you may have a brief word with her—if she's up to it."

As the doctor vanished from sight along the second-floor passageway, there was the sound of a door opening, and the gypsy woman made an appearance from under the stairwell.

"Catalina!" the Squire exclaimed in surprise, rushing to take her hands in his.

Benjamin and Agatha gaped at the two as they carried on an animated conversation in Spanish. At last Agatha moved to touch her brother's sleeve, and he whipped about, quickly apologizing for his bad manners. "The señora and I are old acquaintances," he offered, coldly ignoring Benjamin's suspicious eye.

"Really, Edmund?" Agatha said in disbelief, her eyes distastefully examining the savage creature with a head of wild, curling black hair that fell to her waist. "Wherever did you meet?"

"In London, my dear, at the house of Alessandro Cagliostro. The señora is a favorite of his Countess, in her occupation as a spiritualist."

"Spiritualist!" Agatha exclaimed, looking to Benjamin.

A coarse laugh erupted from the gypsy's throat, and she

let flow a blur of unintelligible sounds for the Squire's ear.

"You know, then," Benjamin said to the Squire, "that this gypsy is the woman who kept Lady Darby company for two years."

"Is this true?" The Squire said to the woman, apparently amazed.

"*Si.*"

The Squire asked another question of her, in Spanish, and she threw up her hands with a shrug and a scowl.

Turning back to Benjamin, Masterson went on to explain that the señora was what Cagliostro called a "medium," capable of making contact with the spirit world; the spirits spoke and moved through her, sometimes, as they had in life. Quite a remarkable person. Señora Catalina de Valencia became well known on the Continent as the "flying gypsy," in the aftermath of a famous séance in which she had, in trance, raised herself from the floor before a dozen notables. She had proceeded to float out of the window, hovering there three floors above the cobble-stone street for long moments, and then returning to the room and her seat at the séance table.

"Really, Edmund," Agatha said, laughing. "What do you take us for, absolute simpletons? I don't believe a word of it."

"Very interesting," Benjamin remarked, eyeing the swarthy creature severely. That monstrous configuration last night could well have been the gypsy woman playing her tricks in some scheme against him. "She simply barged in at the full weight of the storm. There was no throwing her out."

The Squire laughed. "No. No one ousts Catalina. She goes when she is of a mind to go, and remains as long as she has a mind to. Cagliostro screams to the heavens for her to return to London, and she comes only when she chooses, then abruptly vanishes again."

"And I have the honor, imagine," Benjamin said nastily.

"She is a good woman," the Squire snapped. "No harm will befall you while she's here. Catalina follows evil as a hunter tracks the path of an animal, with the intention of destroying it. If you are evil, she'll destroy you. If you're good, she'll protect you."

"Ah! I'm greatly relieved to hear that!" Benjamin exclaimed. "She did indeed say that she had come to protect me. From whom? Why, from that monstrously evil, sinister companion to demons, none other than Mistress Clarissa Gandison. What do you say to that, Squire?"

"Catalina! What is this? What!" he asked in Spanish.

"The daughter is very evil. Murderer."

"No! It isn't true. Liar!"

"Fool, it is true, without doubt."

The Squire's face paled; he looked as though he'd been stunned by a blow. "It's not possible," he whispered.

"What did she say to you?" Agatha cried, clutching at her brother's arm.

"Murderer!" the gypsy screeched, her dark eyes afire. "Catalina know. Fools! In the night, creep like the cat—stalk prey—"

"Catalinal that is enough!" the Squire shouted. "No more of this talk; it's slanderous!"

The woman spat at the Squire's feet and stalked away, slamming the door of her room behind her.

"Well!" Agatha said on an outrush of breath. "Heavens—what a terrifying creature! Whatever possessed you to allow her in, Benjamin?"

"God only knows," he muttered. "Now I'm too curious to take action against her. She tells me the ghost of Lady Darby walks the house; saw her with her own eyes, she did."

"I can believe *that* easily enough," Agatha said, laughing uneasily, "but I certainly don't believe Clarissa is—well, it doesn't bear repeating, it's too ridiculous. Don't you agree, Edmund?"

"Yes—yes, of course," the Squire said vaguely, obviously greatly disturbed. "Nonsense—of course."

"I suspect your old acquaintance might well have been the instrument in turning Lady Darby against her daughter," Benjamin said with assurance. "Now she would turn us all against her."

"Impossible," the Squire murmured. "Catalina, if she was the woman who stayed here at that time, would have departed years before Lady Darby adopted Clarissa."

"Perhaps she returned at some later date."

"Not likely. We'd have known; we were in constant communication with Lady Darby."

Benjamin shrugged, granting that it was a highly improbable idea. Still, he could not convince himself. The nightmarish fury of the specter who had invaded his chamber last night clung in his mind. Had Clarissa gone mad in her old age? With the gypsy her contact to evil spirits? And were the two now together for the final blow against the despised child? Fear clutched at him. The gypsy had said a woman would come; could she possibly have meant Clarissa's arrival in the house?

"Think again," the Squire said dully, "if you are con-

templating removing Catalina from this house. You might put her out, but she'll be in again before the latch is thrown, by one means or another."

"Edmund!" Agatha wailed. "You make it sound as though she were capable of—of magic, black magic."

"Catalina is capable of anything, including murder."

"Gracious! You call *that* a good woman?"

Roger Smythe-Turner came down the stairs, his expression one of concern. "Edmund, she is feverish," he said, frowning. "Unaccountable, actually—her injuries were slight. I can't understand it. She's dazed, barely aware of who she is, as if—"

"She were drugged?" the Squire asked quickly.

"Yes. Quite so. Drugged. I questioned Mercy, and examined the packet. She did not receive an overdose of the sleeping potion. Peculiar. I think perhaps she should be removed from this house—at once."

"Sir!" Benjamin shouted. "Are you implying that I, or my servants—"

"No, young man, I am not! I merely think it best to remove her from a place that holds so many painful memories for her. A depression has settled on her that might explain her curious symptoms. The shock of the fall, the atmosphere here, you understand."

"We'll leave the matter for her to decide, if you please."

"Master Darby, she is in no condition to make such a decision."

"Nor is she in any condition to be moved, I would say."

The doctor was flustered, and had no answer to that. Benjamin followed by ordering the man out of his house. Clarissa could not be in safer hands than his own; he would guard her capably.

At the doctor's departure, the Squire took hold of Benjamin's arm, as if to speak urgently, then let go. He met Benjamin's eyes for a long moment, searching for an answer to an unanswerable question. "Take care," he said at last, turning toward the door.

"Edmund," Agatha said. "I would like to stay. Please. I do so want to see Clarissa. Benjamin will offer me the use of a coach, I'm sure, for my return home."

"No!" the Squire said harshly over his shoulder. "Come along, Agatha."

"Edmund," she said weakly, remaining beside Benjamin. "I—am going to stay."

Her brother turned, scowling. "Do as you're told!" he shouted.

"I'm far too old for you to be ordering me about in such a tone," she exclaimed in a shaking voice. "I'll return before nightfall, rest assured."

"Agatha!"

"Good-bye, Edmund. Expect to see me at table this evening."

"Bully!" Benjamin said jubilantly to her, when her brother had stalked away.

"Dreadful," she whispered. "I feel simply dreadful. To speak to him in such a manner—it was all I could do to hold my ground. I do adore him, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"You dislike him: why?"

"Because he loves her. I suppose that is my best reason."

"Loves her? Whomever do you mean?"

"Clarissa, my dear. Your brother is that mysterious gentleman you spoke of, secretly meeting her."

"Benjamin! I don't believe it."

"True, nonetheless."

"Edmund and Clarissa. But he's like a father to her! Never once has—" her words broke off, and her flushed face writhed under Benjamin's scrutiny, as if her mind had fought against the truth, quickly losing the battle. "I'm stunned. I never suspected. I can understand Edmund finding her attractive, she is so beautiful, but I can't comprehend Clarissa accepting his affection. Edmund is rather dour, you know, and Clarissa is . . . buoyant, exploding with life and daring. Sits a horse like a man. Lady Darby had her on a horse before she was five years old . . . Strange she could take such a spill. She's a champion rider; she holds a number of prizes."

"Perhaps she was assisted over the brink," he offered tightly.

"Assisted? Ah, Benjamin, no."

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "Odd, wouldn't you say, that not a Grandison has shown his face? One would suppose Sir Ronald, at least, would take wing to save her from my foul clutches."

"Sir Ronald left for London in the middle of the holocaust, two days ago, didn't you know? He received word that Lord Percival was taken critically ill. He collapsed in the House of Lords while speaking to the—"

"Ah, that explains it. But Clarissa said, I recall distinctly, that Ronald would no doubt descend on the house."

"The fall disturbed her memory, perhaps."

"Yes. Excuse me a moment, Agatha. I must find the

kitchen boy. I've a question requiring an answer. There's a warm fire in the drawing room."

He was quickly off, finding the lout casually at work scouring iron pots in front of the kitchen hearth. Benjamin stood over the cocky lad and demanded to know what had been so urgent that he had ridden off so hastily the morning before.

The boy answered quickly, with not a bit of guilt on his face or in his faded blue eyes, "I was sent ta fetch a powder for the killing o' rats, Master—from the shop o' Jones at Withernsea Village. And I took a message from Mercy ta Briarmoor. In writing. I rode all day."

"A poison—from the chemist's? Who directed you to make such a purchase?"

"Mercy, o' course," the fellow said contemptuously. "She said they was taking over the 'ouse, she did, drove in by the rains. And no mistake about it; I near lost a toe myself a night ago."

Benjamin exploded into motion. He did not knock at Clarissa's door but threw himself inside, striding toward the bed with his eyes blazing. Clarissa was barely visible under the mountain of coverlets. Mercy leaped to her feet from a chair beside the bed, her look wary.

"The packet, if you please, Mercy," Benjamin commanded angrily, a hand outstretched to the woman and his fingers moving in demand.

"The—packet, sir?"

"Yes! Into my hand, at once."

"But—the doctor . . ."

"Give it here, I say!"

From the pocket of her apron Mercy produced a small white envelope, but did not readily hold it out for his taking. "Sir—a don't know what this is about. A frightful night she'll 'ave, sure enough, if—"

"Give-it-to-me," he said ominously, and with great reluctance she put it into his hand.

He then stepped to Clarissa's bedside, to gaze down on her flushed face. Her eyes were closed, her lids fluttering spasmodically, and her lips moved silently. He leaned down, hoping to catch her words. His hair raised at the nape of his neck and he jerked erect. She had breathed, "Jason—oh, Jason." He slowly turned to face Mercy. "Woman," he said stonily, "I am compelled to wonder how good a friend you are to this lady. You were Lady Darby's servant, weren't you?"

"I was," Mercy whispered, avoiding his eyes.

"And your dead mother was closer all her life to Lady

Darby than anyone else on earth, her friend and confidante? Well! Speak up. Is that true?"

"Aye, 'tis true, but—"

"But you chose to side with Mistress Clarissa when the split came, hmm? Against your mother, and your mistress? I find that quite unlikely, extremely difficult to believe. I intend to have the contents of this packet examined. If you harbor any evil intentions against Mistress Clarissa I'll soon enough know it."

"As for now, take yourself out of this chamber and do not return. I'll send to Hedgewood for a woman trained in the care of the sick. Out!"

Mercy burst into tears, burbling protests. He paid no attention, once again frigidly ordering her out. She rushed away then, weeping.

"Have no fear, Clarissa," Benjamin said tenderly down to the fevered woman under the coverlets, lost in her drugged sleep. "I'll protect you, with my life if I have to. Clarissa—I love you."

◆ CHAPTER TWELVE ◆

Agatha took Mercy's place beside Clarissa until old Maggie from the village could come to watch over her. Clarissa woke, lucid for a brief moment, and pleaded with Agatha not to leave her; she was so frightened. When Agatha asked what it was she feared so, Clarissa refused to answer, thrashing her head from side to side and moaning. Agatha soothed her, promising that she would not leave her alone in the house.

Dinner was not served until very late; it was past nine o'clock when Benjamin returned from Withernsea village. The great dining hall was rendered more informal by the placement of high screens around the table so that the warmth of the fire was somewhat contained within the smaller space. Benjamin sat silent and scowling at the head of the table, Agatha at the center far to his right, and the gypsy woman at the foot directly facing him, some twelve feet away. Candelabra holding ten candles in a circle lighted the center of the table. The serving girls tiptoed in and out with trays, responding to Benjamin's curt commands with little bursts of motion, like skittish birds

flushed by a forest beast. They served the fearsome gypsy tremulously, startled by her vulgar grunts and sudden arm-swinging outbursts at their presence beside her. Agatha kept her eye on her plate, merely going through the motions of eating, and taking only a tiny bit of food. The tension was smothering, and she was concerned as to her brother's reaction regarding her message that she would stay over for an indefinite period, at Clarissa's request.

They had finished eating and were having tea and cheese, when suddenly a wind swept through the room, bending the candle flames. Agatha commented that someone must have opened an outside door. The gypsy woman muttered deep in her throat, her eyes darting about the room. Benjamin fixed his eyes on the witch, closely watching the workings of her face. He was well aware of the source of the draft; he felt its presence strongly and was curious to know if she were as sensitive as she claimed to be to the presence of earthbound spirits. Again wind swept over the table, extinguishing two of the candles.

"Heavens!" Agatha exclaimed, looking to Benjamin. "Whatever *is* causing such a draft? I feel so cold."

"Sss," the gypsy hissed, her hands raised and her head cocked, straining to hear.

Her eyes seemed to be losing their luster, fading; now they were blank of expression. A cry exploded from her throat and her head dropped, her chin on her breast.

"Benjamin?" Agatha whispered, rising out of her chair.

"Sit down," he commanded. "She's playing a game with us. We're being entertained by a performance of occult spirit-raising. They are very convincing, I've heard, but nonetheless trickery, pure theatrics for the benefit of the credulous.

"Agatha, I said sit down. For God's sake, you take these things far too seriously."

"I'm frightened," she whispered, but she obeyed him by falling back into her seat. "I can't look at her. She—is she dead? Whatever is she *doing*?"

At that instant the remaining candles were snuffed out, an invisible being seeming to have taken breath and blown them out all at once. Only the fire was left to light the table and the corners of the screened enclosure dimly. The gypsy's head snapped back, her eyes open, and she was another person. Her entire manner was altered: her fingers were quivering, her head rocking on her shoulders, her face drawn down into lines of old age, with her mouth

drooping at the corners and her eyelids heavy; her shoulders were now stooped.

"Ja-son," she said, not in her own voice but in a cackle as from the throat of an extremely old person.

"Dear God—" Agatha cried. "Lady Darby! Benjamin—Her voice. It is!"

"Agatha," he said impatiently. "Hush. Not another word. I want to hear all she has to say."

"Jason—? What is it? Ah, Jason. I can't reach you. Listen to me, Jason—my love, hear me."

Benjamin bit down on his lower lip and his hands knotted into tight fists on the table top. He refused to oblige the witch by replying. She'd have to play the game without any assistance from him. He'd lived with a ghost for over eight years; a spiritualist was quite an unnecessary agent. This was a charade for his benefit, a typical charlatan's trick to stab at the heart of victims who ached to contact their loved dead, willing to believe any sign, any word uttered . . . Curious, the gypsy seemed suddenly to have mastered the English language; it was likely she had used the accent for effect, so that her trance speech would appear miraculous.

"Jason— Clarissa my beloved daughter; he will come to you, and he will love you, and it will be my loving him, all over again. Jason lives. Ah—wait till—"

Agatha once again leaped to her feet, a hand covering her mouth. "Stop this!" she cried, her voice breaking.

The gypsy's head turned and her watery eyes fixed on the figure addressing her. "—Agatha? Eh? Is it you? My, you are so grown, a woman. You recall, don't you, the days at my knee? I told you the tale of my love, and you dreamed the dream, shared my Jason . . . One day, playing on the lawn, you sat on a hornet who had the bad taste to put his stinger into your tender backside. To soothe your tears, I gave to you a sweet and you lay flat on your stomach listening while I spoke of Jason, how we first met as children . . ."

"Yes," Agatha whispered, her eyes rounded. "I remember that incident so clearly."

"And is he not all that I swore he was, eh? And more?"

"Yes, yes, he is."

"He will not heed me. I'm beside myself. I speak, and he doesn't hear. Warn him, my dear Agatha. Save him for me. Don't allow her to destroy him. Grandison—Grandison—she became obsessed with the sound of that vulgar name. Broke my feeble heart with her cruel tongue and vicious nature. Spat on me when I said his name, spat

on my Jason's name, and took for herself the *foul* name. She must not gain possession. Hear me, Agatha—warn him. She is obscene, a devil. I had been warned, but would not listen, refused to believe what my eyes and ears told me—until it was nearly too late. It was no *accident*—planned. The sea—Murder, murder!"

Catalina slumped forward, her head and shoulders falling on the table, her teacup and saucer crashing to the floor. There was a brief silence. Then she slowly sat up, herself once again.

"An excellent performance," Benjamin said too loudly, clapping his hands. "Well rehearsed, obviously."

"Benjamin!" Agatha exclaimed, moving around the table to stand beside his chair. "It was Lady Darby's voice, I swear it."

He ignored her, his anger directed at the scowling gypsy. "I'm curious, gypsy, as to why you're so insistent on turning me against Mistress Grandison. Your previous warnings failed to impress me, so you resort to theatrics. Did you truly think I'd take you seriously? If so, you would have done better to speak words less well known to myself and all Yorkshire. Any one of my servants could have said the same; it was very unimaginative of you, I must say."

"Que? What Catalina say, eh?" the gypsy asked, throwing up her hands.

"Ah, you return to the thick accent. What did you say? Exactly that which Lady Darby said to untold numbers of acquaintances in her final days."

"So?"

"So," he echoed sarcastically.

"I was bitten by a hornet," Agatha insisted. "No one but Clarissa or Lady Darby would recall such a petty incident, Benjamin!"

"Poison," the gypsy said, leaning forward arrogantly to rest her elbows on the table. "Eh? Is true? Poison in the potion, señor?"

"Correct," he snapped. "Pray tell me who could have mixed it in with the sleeping potion? Yourself, perhaps?"

"No!"

"My housekeeper, then?"

"Oh no, Benjamin," Agatha cried. "Mercy would never—"

"But someone did," he interrupted viciously.

"Not Mercy. Never."

"Tell me," he said to the witch, "since you claim to see all and know all, who it was—who is the one who attempted to murder Clarissa Grandison with arsenic."

"No body, señor," was the creature's quick reply. "Give to *self*, eh? Victim you señor, Hahson Darby."

"What?" he yowled, lurching to his feet. "She put a deadly poison down her *own* throat! Preposterous—I am the intended victim? Woman, you are nine times an idiot. I will listen to no more of your savage maledictions. A good night to you. I excuse you. Surely you are weary. It has been a long day."

"Catalina no sleep," she said, rising to her feet, a talon-like hand caressing her bespangled arm, her metal bracelets ringing and jangling irritantly. "This night Catalina no sleep—watch—for creeping cat. For the walk go—come back—to please leave open door."

"Ah? You cannot enter, regardless?"

"*Sí!*" she spat out. "Is more easy if door open."

"Go. Allow me to surprise you. It may or may not be open to you, according to my inclination."

"Really," Agatha protested, "I do think you're being unnecessarily rude, Benjamin."

"I'm disturbed," he shouted. "My God, Agatha—there was arsenic in the packet from which Mercy was drawing the dosage given to Clarissa. You can't comprehend the portent of such a fact?"

"Certainly. But you're reacting out of all proportion. Calm would seem to be in order, and a rational approach to the dilemma."

"Rational! How can I be calm, when she lies upstairs half dead of arsenic poisoning?"

"Benjamin, I—I just can't believe it. It does ring false somehow. No one would stand to gain *anything* by Clarissa's death—no one. She has no enemies. It would be so pointless. There is no logic in it, unless . . ."

"The arsenic was real enough, according to Jones, and it was purchased by my kitchen boy at Mercy's direction. I suspect that woman has secretly despised Clarissa all these years and would see her dead merely to satisfy that loathing."

"Ridiculous! Mercy adores Clarissa and always has: utter devotion; she would kill herself if Clarissa asked it of her."

"Your opinion, for what it's worth."

"Yes, if you wish to put it that way."

"Well, gypsy," Benjamin said, but glancing about he saw that the woman had silently slipped out of the room. "Gone," he said flatly, "And for good, I can only hope."

"I tell you, there's no doubt in my mind," Agatha said excitedly, her face flushed. "That was Lady Darby speak-

ing. I could never mistake that voice, her manner of speech."

"An excellent mimic," he mumbled sourly. "She did live with Lady Darby for almost two years."

"Oh, you're impossible! You believe the wildest things, when you're of a mind to, and become a stubborn jackass about the things you don't *wish* to believe. Lady Darby always said that that was your one glaring fault, a single-mindedness that was—" Her words broke off, her eyes widening at what she had begun to say so naturally. She stared at him, searching—stunned, moving back a little from him.

"You have begun to believe the gossip," Benjamin said with a wry smile. "Soon you will automatically call me Jason."

"No," she whispered. "It can't be." She stepped farther away into the shadow.

"Jason was to return—for Clarissa. But you secretly wished that he could be yours, I wager. If you believe it, Agatha, why don't you step this way, into my arms, and make the dream a reality?"

"Forgive me," she gasped, turning to run from the room.

He was alone with fear and confusion.

Two rather uneventful days passed. Clarissa's general health improved rapidly. She was sitting up and eating well. Agatha remained in the house, near Clarissa throughout, reading to her friend and reminiscing with her about their childhood days.

On the night of the gypsy's theatrical performance at the table, Benjamin had seen the witch from his chamber window, out on the front drive, looking toward the stables, then east toward the Firth. She then kneeled down, fairly sniffing the damp earth for some scent, next raising her head, her eyes scanning the grounds and the rising walls of the house. At last she strode west and vanished from sight behind the rose hedge. He had no idea when she returned, or how she entered, since he had decided to bolt the door. She was in her chamber the next morning, gruffly demanding breakfast. The following night she could be heard prowling the house, in every closet and corridor, through the galleria to the unused upper floors, searching for what, he could not guess—skeletons, he supposed, skeletons in the Darby closets.

But there were only two days of tranquillity. Clarissa

had not been told of the gypsy woman's presence in the house. The nurse had been dismissed, because the patient was on her feet, limping about her chamber and quite cheerful.

Agatha left the room at noon, briefly, to fetch a lunch tray; while she was absent, Catalina presented herself to Mistress Grandison. A shattering scream echoed through the house. Benjamin bolted out of the library and raced up the stairs, with Agatha close at his heels, and Mercy running from the linen closet. They converged on Clarissa's room to find the two face to face, the one wild-eyed and glaring, the other about to faint away in terror. In an instant Benjamin had Clarissa in his arms; he carried her to her bed, while he shouted over his shoulder at the gypsy, ordering her out.

Clarissa was nearly hysterical, crying that what that horrible woman had said was too terrible, too terrible.

"I want to leave," she wept, "Please, Jason, take me to Briarmoor—I can't stay in this house."

She clung to him, arms tight about his neck. Impulsively he kissed her tear-stained cheeks, her eyelids, her hair, speaking of his love for her, that he wished her never to leave but to become his wife, forgetting the presence of all but Clarissa.

She tried to regain control, burying her face in his shoulder. "That hideous woman—make her leave; I can't bear the sight of her."

"Shh, now; she has gone," he murmured in her ear. "My dearest Clarissa, you are safe in my arms. Always safe in my arms."

Agatha's face flushed and she slowly backed out of the room, with tears in her eyes, and the small light of a raging jealousy barely veiled. Clarissa had but to flutter an eyelash and all men within reach of the subtle wind that flutter wrought on the air fell to her knees begging for her favors. Mercy followed Agatha out into the corridor, softly closing the door to the two entwined on the bed.

"Will he seriously ask her to marry him, do you think?" Agatha asked, swallowing hard to subdue nausea.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised, Miss," Mercy replied tonelessly, walking away from Agatha, "Not a whit surprised."

"Mercy!" Agatha called after the housekeeper. "You—you are innocent of any—I know that."

"Aye—ya think so, do ya?" the woman said almost inaudibly. "Not altogether, Miss—I fear I'm not altogether innocent, if the truth be known."

Agatha covered her lips with a hand. She stood there bewildered a moment, turned to look once at the closed door, then moved mechanically down the passageway to her own room. Clarissa wouldn't be needing her for some time. She entered the chamber with her eyes downcast, and didn't notice the woman who was positioned firmly near the far window. Agatha stood before the looking glass studying her plain face, a palm against each cheek. She sighed and quickly turned away, coming up short at the sight of the hawk-eyed gypsy stepping ominously toward her.

"Terrible woman!" Agatha cried, glaring into the harpy's fierce eyes. "What is it you want here? Leave this house. Leave him be, for the love of God."

Catalina stood towering over her petite adversary, her eyes vacant. "See star fall—from sky," she said prophetically, raising a rigid hand to demonstrate catastrophe. "Omen. Death! Say this, you—to brother."

"Get out of my room," Agatha said hoarsely, backing away in revulsion.

"Listen, you! Catalina see, with own eyes. *Comprende?* *Comprendel!*"

Agatha started at the ferocious yowl, nodding dumbly.

"Say to brother—say to—" The gypsy's facial expression, to Agatha's increasing horror, began to alter, her head once again rocking on her shoulders, the timbre of her voice becoming hideously familiar. "Tell Edmund—Agatha—say to Edmund—it was not my heart that failed, not my advanced age that took me—no. A pillow over my face so that I could not breathe—a pillow snatched from me that feeble hold on earthly existence—a murder. Murder!"

"No," Agatha hissed against sweating palms, shaking her head in denial.

"Yes! Murder. The final contact. Catalina is to die—and I will have no voice. Save him. You must save him, Agatha—from—Clarissa." On speaking the name, the gypsy writhed as though in terrible agony, her arms flailing about, her lips drawn tight over bared teeth. "Speak to Edmund—speak to him. He holds the key. The key, Agatha. Your brother has the key. Bid him unlock the door of the graves, and I will lead him. Help—me!"

The gypsy gasped and fell in a crumpled heap on the floor at Agatha's feet. She stared down at the body, numbed, and then let a cry of terror explode from her throat as she ran from the room. She fell headlong into Benjamin; she had not seen him step from Clarissa's

room, in her blind hysteria. He caught her in his arms and she clung to him.

"What is it?" he asked urgently, as she trembled in his arms. "Agatha, dear—what has happened?"

"Lady Darby—" she sputtered into his shoulder. "She, she spoke to me. She said, that—that she was . . . Benjamin! She swore that she was murdered, and I believed her. Dear God! I believed it."

"You *saw* her?" he exclaimed, pushing her back to search her sodden face.

"Yes. Well, not exactly; the gypsy—she . . ."

"Ah! as I thought," he shouted. "Witch! I've had my fill of her. If she doesn't leave this house, I swear to God I'll cut her foul throat."

Agatha's eyes widened and she wrenched herself from his hold on her shoulders. Regaining control, she said huskily, "Catalina has a foreknowledge of death; she expects to die soon. Will you be the one to stoop to murder, Benjamin? You've reached that low an ebb? Are you completely mad?"

"Watch your tongue," he said angrily, turning his back on her.

"No!" Agatha shouted. "You *are* mad, if you think you're Jason Darby, if you persist in this insane pursuit of Clarissa. Mooning over her as *he* did over Lady Darby, making a complete fool of yourself. Clarissa will never have you—never. She—"

"Oh!" he roared, whirling about, eyes fired. "You think not, eh? May I be the first to inform you, with great pleasure and no little smug satisfaction, that Clarissa Grandison only moments ago agreed to become my wife, and the mistress of Hedgewood."

Agatha's eyes rounded. "I—I don't believe it," she whispered.

"You have but to ask the lady, herself," he said, gesturing toward Clarissa's door.

"—But—she is to marry Sir Ronald!"

"I fear the man is in for a bit of a surprise; a pity."

"Benjamin, why? You don't love her—this is insane. What can you hope to accomplish, except to find yourself floating face-down on Bridington Firth? If you are set on an exact duplication of Jason's life, does that include being murdered and thrown into the sea? No, you can't do this; I won't let you."

Benjamin's head began to swim; Agatha's face blurred before his eyes; her words seemed to be coming from far away. He heard his own voice saying something about

sons, he must have sons—and love, he wished to love, and be loved.

"I love you," Agatha cried, reaching out to take hold of his shoulders. "Benjamin, I'm begging you: don't marry her, she'll destroy you. Take me, if you so desperately require love, and I'll give you a son. Benjamin! I believed her. She knew her daughter as no one else. She warns us. Please—"

Agatha threw herself on him, her arms locked about his chest, but her touch was distant and couldn't penetrate the thick resistance that enveloped him. He made no move to push her away, merely waited stiffly for her to realize that she couldn't sway him, murmuring, "It's too late, too late, Agatha . . ."

She drew back at last, flushing. "Forgive me," she whispered. "How very shameless of me. I can't imagine what possessed me to— It won't happen again. I sincerely wish you all happiness." With that, she turned and strode away with her chin held high, down the staircase and to the foyer, where she rang for Mercy. With her cloak over her shoulders, not looking back, she left the house—in spite of her promise to Clarissa. She had an urgent message for her brother, from Lady Darby, and she intended that he should receive it quickly.

When Agatha had gone, Benjamin shouted for the gypsy, furiously searching the house. But she was nowhere to be found.

That night, however, as he sat, morose, in front of the fire in his bedchamber, the sounds of her stealthy prowling, muffled, persistent, announced her vile presence. He thought of taking a lamp and flushing her out, but in the maze of passageways and chambers she could easily elude him. Curse her, what did she seek in the west wing? It was the quarter built by Hugh Darby, on the ruins of the dead monastery. The ancient bell tower had been rebuilt at that time, but had gone to ruin once again with passing time. The west wing had been closed off since before the birth of Jason Darby; dust and decay were all that could be found there, other than possibly the wandering shades of endless numbers of deceased Darbys, holding claim still to their old estate, and perhaps the spirits of devout monks, their hands folded in prayer, singing yet their melancholy hymns. It was above, in the fetid tombs that once were bedchambers, where the gypsy met with Lady Darby for the furthering of their sinister plot to destroy young Clarissa.

He no longer pondered the why of it. Suddenly it had

become patently obvious: his love for Clarissa, his wish to make her his wife, would return the estate to her, and she would have won, after all, the struggle against a mother gone mad in old age. The specter of the sighs had become a raving, fiendish hag, thirsty for the blood of her daughter, wild to prevent the reclamation. Mercy was the instrument, subject to the will of the specter and the gypsy. In truth, it would perhaps be advisable to remove Clarissa from the house for the present, until he could in some way exorcise the evil presence and threat. How could one so good in life become evil in death? His heart was heavy, sickening him, as he remembered the nights, months past, when she had come to him in all her young innocence, to love him. Love and hate, so closely interlaced, were indeed indistinguishable from one another; love this moment, and in the next . . .

Now he would set on a course designed to destroy this woman whom he might once have loved so unconditionally, were he her Jason—but he was *not*. That Jason was dead.

But, later that night—he had been deep asleep—he was wakened by a light touch against his cheek, a fingertip. His eyes slowly opened and fixed on her. She was in the same red gown that hag had worn, but now she was love, desire, happiness, all things to him, and he reached out to pull her into his arms, unable to resist her tremulous smiles and tearful entreaties. Before daybreak she vanished, though he made every effort to remain alert, hoping to hold her back from the dark.

Awake, desolate, he sat on the bed, his thoughts running wild. Then, from somewhere near, not outside the door or windows but apparently from the far wall, a peculiar hum sounded, like that of raised but muffled voices. He leaped to his feet and, rushing to the wall, planted his ear flat against it. Nothing. On the opposite side stood an empty chamber which had belonged to Lady Darby while she could still just manage the staircase. He ran from his room, along the dark corridor, to throw open the chamber door, but it was securely locked. He shouted a command to open the door. There was silence. Turning heel, he plunged back to his room, catching up his ring of keys. He tried one after another, at last freeing the bolt. The room was black.

He stumbled inside, shouting, "Who is in here? Speak!"

His foot struck a small object that made a ringing sound like that of a tiny bell. He bent down and blindly searched for the thing. At last he caught it up, his fingers

testing it; it was one of the glittering multiple gold rings the gypsy wore. He managed to strike a flame, lighting a lamp that bathed the room in a murky light. Near where he had found the bauble lay a pool of blood, still warm as he, dazed, put a forefinger to it. And the bed, turned down, was mussed as if it had been slept in. The room was immaculate otherwise, not a wisp of dust or a cobweb, yet he'd ordered it locked, sealed off from the house out of a distaste for the image of Clarissa old and dying, grieving and alone. Perfumes stood on the dressing cabinet, and jewels, tossed there as though they'd only just been removed. The horror of it washed over him. "Jason—don't leave me, I have a hideous sense of dread, as if you will never return." He stared at the blood—it became his own, and the echoing words in his head altered so that they seemed a *threat* rather than a plea. He heard the thunder of a horse's hooves, the roar of the hungry sea, saw a man astride a horse approaching from the obscured wood—and an awful cry from Ronald's throat. A weapon struck the side of his head, toppling him over the cliff edge. Suddenly he was unable to keep his balance, the vision was so overwhelming. He caught hold of something solid, lurched sideways, and fell against a soft, giving surface, then slid into an icy unconsciousness.

When Benjamin woke, the room was no longer black, but dimly lit by sunlight that filtered through the drapes. He stumbled to his feet, groaning as pain stabbed at the back of his neck. Dull, he looked about him. His eye caught the dark stain on the carpet. Lord, was he in such a state that he would faint away at the sight of blood? Peculiar, he couldn't recall closing the door; he'd left it ajar, for certain. Unsteadily he stepped toward the door, to find it locked. And his keys were nowhere to be found. The bed was no longer mussed, but neatly made with the white lace spread; the curtains were half drawn. Someone had entered, stepped over him and around him where he lay, and left with his keys, locking him inside. It could have been no one but Mercy, or one of the chambermaids.

Furious, he lifted an arm to begin beating on the door, then drew back, biting his lower lip thoughtfully . . . He'd heard the sounds of an argument coming from this room. There was the blood on the floor. The door had been locked when he first came in; whoever had been in this room might have had access to some other entrance or exit than the door. He moved to the panel wall near the dark bloodstain. He frowned, a thought lingering just out

of reach; what was it he had written in the autobiography about the room Jason Darby had had designed for his bride? This room? Added on, it was, by taking in one half of the second-floor gallery, sealing off—

Benjamin exploded into motion, his hands sweeping over the polished wall, down along the elaborate moldings; at last he found the latch at the far right corner of the baseboard. Standing, he sucked in a breath and put out both hands, pushing hard against the panel. It immediately sprang ajar, opening on the five-foot-wide landing of a dark, moldering staircase. He stood immobile for a moment, staring into the somehow familiar black passageway—the wall of his own chamber, another latch; the two rooms were connected. Numbly he stepped back for the lamp. Since he'd been able to hear the argument, this panel would have had to be ajar. To enter here without a key, a person familiar with the house could have utilized this staircase. Apprehensively he moved toward the opening, holding the lamp high as he entered the tomblike landing. The light, casting down the staircase for only a few steps, revealed disturbed dust, and broken cobwebs hanging awry.

Holding his breath, he descended—down the twisting, treacherously slippery granite steps that led to the forgotten dungeons, where witches and warlocks were once held prisoner and tortured on racks, with fire tongs and long needles, before their executions by fire.

Seepage from the recent rains had made a fetid swamp of the stone floor, through which he then waded, making an effort not to breathe; the stench was like that of decaying bodies. Now he was directly beneath the bell tower. A crumbling wooden staircase led up to the bellfry; another led still deeper into the ancient recesses of the buried monastery.

Benjamin hesitated, wondering why he persisted in this ridiculous search; what did he hope to find other than more gloom? A maniacal screech then sent him plunging for the protection of a solid wall; he flattened himself against it, his heart leaping in his chest. A bat dove at his head, and he fended the vulture off with flailing arms, nearly losing his grip on the lamp. Rats squealed viciously now, too, scampering about his bare feet. Lord! he'd not had sense enough to put on boots. It was no good; he must go back before he lost his way, or all his toes to the hungry beasts. He held up the lamp, moving it in a slow arc, the pale light casting weird shadows on the greenish walls and age-corroded framework. His eyes slid over

a whiteness disinterestedly, following the lamps's beam, but in the next instant he froze, whipping about, his eyes darting back toward the underpinnings of the belfry stair. An arm; a white, limp arm. He staggered toward it, irrationally certain that it was Clarissa.

"Clarissa!" he cried out, and the name echoed in the rafters overhead.

Benjamin fell to his knees, reaching out to touch the indistinct limb. It was cold. His hand recoiled from it. He put the lamp close into the oblong crevice—and black, dead eyes stared into his. The gypsy. Her throat was slashed, her face unrecognizable from the bestial attack that had been inflicted on her.

"My God!" he hissed, jerking the lamp away to hide the sight from his sickened eyes.

His mind began to spin with words—words of anger he'd said to Agatha: that he would kill the woman if she didn't leave his house. He leaped to his feet, certain of what he must do—leave her where she was, where no one would ever find her. She would merely have vanished once again, as was consistent with her reputation.

He turned, and his foot struck something solid in the muck—on the floor. He looked down. Stunned, he stared at the wooden object. Kneeling, he took it up, rubbing it against his leg to identify it more clearly. There could be no mistake; it was Squire Masterson's favorite oakwood pipe; he'd recognize it anywhere, the pipe that was always in the man's waistcoat pocket wherever he went about his acres, to his offices, on a horse or in a carriage—or when in a dungeon intending to murder? He wrapped his fingers tight around the pipe, rising to an erect stance. Squire Masterson had entered somehow, but not by the front. There was an outside entrance; there *must* be.

By following the staircase that led to the cavernous stone cellars, Benjamin soon enough found the entrance. A tunnel led upward to a steel door. The door was unlocked, and opened onto thick shrubbery growing adjacent to the lawn that sloped downward to the cliff edge of Bridington Firth. To have entered, or left, by this door, Masterson would have to have a key. Benjamin had noticed the door from the outside on his first inspection of the estate, after receiving the inheritance; he had tried to open it, out of curiosity, and found it locked. Just how often Masterson had used this door, and for what purposes, were questions to which he fully intended to find answers. It was most likely by this door that the gypsy entered the night he had locked her out, perhaps with the

aid of Masterson. Perhaps the witch had learned too much about the Squire's activities to continue living. She had warned Benjamin that *he* was to be the victim. It could be that Masterson was set on murdering him, perhaps both Clarissa and him, out of rage at losing her.

Of no mind to retrace that maze he had just taken, Benjamin, filthy and half dressed as he was, stalked around the house and entered by way of the kitchen—to the gaping surprise of the cook and kitchen maids.

"I'll have my breakfast in one hour," he shouted as he passed through, leaving a path of mucky footsteps across the immaculate tile floor.

◆ CHAPTER THIRTEEN ◆

Sir Ronald did not return from London following the death and funeral of his father, Lord Percival. He remained at Briarmoor Town House, confining his activities to the grounds and receiving only a select group of steadfast friends from whom he could be assured of receiving a most tender sympathy regarding the loss of both his father and his fiancée. Sir Ronald's good taste met with Benjamin's full and enthusiastic approval.

The wedding was set for the eighth of June, directly following Sir Ronald's letter to Clarissa acknowledging her decision and giving his rather petulant blessing. The fop had the temerity to add, in closing, with bitter sarcasm, that she could rest at ease: he harbored no inclination toward following in his grandfather's footsteps; thus she could feel fairly secure in the hope of enjoying a bit more than one night as wife to Jason Darby.

Clarissa laughed delightedly, on reading Sir Ronald's reassuring pronouncement, commenting that he could be terribly amusing when he was of a mind, and offering the letter for Benjamin's reading.

"I see nothing amusing about it," Benjamin said nastily, giving the letter back to her.

"Ah," she said, pouting a little and then smiling at him, "my darling, you are so dour, really. He meant it lightly, truly he did. Gracious, he couldn't have been serious, since Ronald would be the last one on earth to admit that his grandfather was a murderer."

It was a warm day and the windows of the drawing room were open to allow in the cooling outside air. Since she had agreed to become his wife, Clarissa had made it a habit to spend each Monday and Saturday at Hedgewood Manor, days for which Benjamin lived the remaining five days of the week. Now that the weather was good once again and her health entirely regained, they often rode across the moors with a leather hamper of food over the saddle horn, or swam in the Firth in the late evenings when prying eyes would not be likely to observe Clarissa's lack of propriety, as she dove into the frigid, broiling sea with nothing covering her but a shift.

Today they had decided to stay at home, to talk of the wedding and prepare a guest list. A thousand and one aggravating details rose: first the deciding of a date, which stirred a minor argument between them. Benjamin didn't want to wait two full months. Clarissa insisted on a wedding in June. He, of course, demurred.

"Jason," Clarissa said sweetly, moving to sit closer to him on the divan, "do cheer yourself, or I shall positively throw a temper. We have Ronald's blessing, we've made positive plans this very day. Smile, for goodness' sake, or I'll think you're regretful and wish to crawl out of it."

He caught her in his arms, holding her tight to him, a hand caressing her back. "Regret?" he said huskily in her ear, kissing that ear. "I'm beside myself with joy. I'm not the jubilant sort, you know that . . ."

"Yes, I know," she sighed, putting her lips against his cheek.

He squeezed her, burying his face in her neck. "Must we wait—two full months?" he groaned. "We are to marry, why . . ."

She put her hands against his shoulders, pushing him away from her. Shaking a reprimanding finger in his face, she laughed. "No more of *that*, sir. I shall reach the marriage bed as a lady should. No nonsense, you hear?"

He smiled, quickly kissing her mouth. "I hear. But I could argue all day against the virtues of virtue. One of the more ridiculous customs for which I have enormous distaste. Woman, how do I know you'll satisfy me, eh? Like wine, a taste: if bad, refused; if fine, accepted. That's how a man should in fact choose a wife."

She squealed in mock horror, leaping to her feet. "And what of us poor females?" she said down to him. "We must accept our man whatever he is, good or bad, without any opportunity to taste. It's the same. We *both* take the risk, hmm?"

"Taste, taste, I am your willing slave."

"Oh! you're impossible. Truly impossible. I must be out of my mind to have accepted your proposal."

"Clarissa," he exclaimed, sobering. "Don't speak like that, ever."

"Jason!"

"I could not continue to live, if you refused me now."

"But, my darling, I was only making fun with you," she cried, falling to her knees before him, and putting her arms about his waist, her head against his chest. "I will marry you, believe that, on the eighth day of June."

"Say you love me," he said urgently down to her tousled head. "Say it, Clarissa."

"I love you," she murmured, almost inaudibly. "Clarissa and Jason—forever."

"Clarissa?" he said apprehensively, a hand moving to touch her hair. "Do you think me mad?"

She did not reply, still against him.

"You know, I've told you, of how your mother has haunted me all these years, that she lingers still in this house. I can't let you marry me, expecting that I am—an ordinary man, because that I am not, and likely will never be."

She raised her head, meeting his eyes. "I know what you are," she whispered.

"Can you *live* with it? Are you certain, Clarissa? I'd die, rather than make you unhappy. I can't promise you—"

"I have asked for no promises, Jason."

He looked away from her, his heart tight in his chest. "I've tried, believe that, but I can't dispel her presence here. Do you think we would do better to live elsewhere? I could get a handsome sum for—"

"Jason! Never!" she exclaimed. "Sell Hedgewood? You couldn't."

"No, I doubt that I could," he said on a sigh. "I only thought, for you—"

"I survived her madness before, and I will again. No harm will come to me, Jason, not here."

"But you were given poison—arsenic. If it happened once . . ."

"Nonsense, simply nonsense. Poor Mercy is still the worse for your terrible accusations against her that day. It was that monstrous gypsy woman, no doubt of it, and she has vanished—we can only pray for good. Ghosts do not have the power to place poison in—"

"This ghost does, I fear," he said. "I've told you how she materializes, becomes flesh, warm to the touch . . ."

"Oh, I do believe you imagine a great deal of it, my darling. Really. When we're married, I'll keep you too occupied for the seeing of ghosts. Indeed, can she expect to creep into our bed, putting herself between us? What a frightening thought, and amusing, too."

"Amusing," he muttered doubtfully.

"Yes, amusing. You lack a sense of humor, Jason. I shall laugh at her if she attempts to come between us, laugh at her." She lifted herself, kissing him lightly on the mouth. "Truthfully," she admitted softly, her eyes lighted with concern for him, "I don't believe in ghosts, only in strong memories. The dead live in our memories so vividly that they often seem quite as alive as before, and we see them again in the places where we knew them so well. No more. No more than that, dear Jason."

"And *my* peculiar collection of vagrant memories?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Why would *I* see your mother, if, as you say, ghosts are mere vivid recollections. I didn't know her at all, as you, or—"

"But how can you *say* that?" she asked, her eyes wide with amused surprise. "No one knew her as well as you, Jason—no one. . . . I must win you away from her, make you forget her. Then and only then will her ghost cease to exist, when your mind will have dismissed her. Thereafter *I* will appear before you, awake or asleep, everywhere, haunting you with my beauty and passion."

Benjamin shivered, as a coldness washed over him. "Which Jason Darby are you marrying, Clarissa?" he whispered emotionally, "The dead, or the living?"

"What a strange thing to say!" she exclaimed, leaning back from him, studying his solemn face. "I am marrying the only Jason Darby I know, is the only answer I can give. I am marrying the man I love."

"You never forget and call me Benjamin."

"But why should I? You're no longer Benjamin. As I changed my name, so you changed yours. When have you ever referred to me as Mistress Darby?"

"Never."

"There you are. Really, we've become far too glum. I must go." On her feet, she leaned down and kissed his forehead. "I promised to pay a call on the Mastersons this afternoon. Edmund sent a message that he wished to see me on an urgent matter.

"Do you think he's been behaving rather strangely of late? I certainly do. Distant. Yes, that's the right word,

simply not there at all when you speak to him. And Agatha: I believe she's resigned herself to spinsterhood; not a single beau has called on her in months and months. Poor dear, she really isn't all that plain. It's not *she* that's so particular, if the truth be known, but Edmund. I think that if I had been a man, he would have set Agatha after me; to have Hedgewood, you know. He's ambitious. Edmund was always so ambitious. It's strange he didn't set her after you, Jason, considering. She wouldn't have complained, I tell you the truth. Agatha secretly loves you, did you know?"

"I know," he said, watching her face.

"Well! How guileless of you, my darling. You might have at least—"

"Clarissa, please. You're suddenly deafening me with a flood of pointless chatter."

"Ahl Already you complain." She laughed, kissed him again and swept out of the room, cheerfully calling Mercy for her cloak and hat.

Lights blazed from every window of Hedgewood Manor: torches were set twenty paces apart along each side of the long, curved approach. Not a single invitation had received a negative reply. A first-of-the-season ball was rarely missed by socialites confined by bad weather through the long winter; not one of them could let this occasion pass. To fail to hear the formal announcement, from Mistress Clarissa's cousin Sir Maynard, of her proposed marriage to The Thorn? Never. In grand coaches they arrived in full regalia, one chattering group after another. Lady Hodgkinson, wheezing dreadfully, suffering still from the asthmatic condition that had plagued her the entire winter, weakly stepped from her silver-appointed carriage on the arm of her daughter, Lydia; if she were at death's door, she had informed her objecting doctor, she would get herself up to be at Hedgewood Manor on such a night; she wouldn't miss it for the world. With everyone there except herself? To hear it all from the tongues of gossips? Never in this world.

Benjamin greeted his guests as they entered with formal bows and insincere blandishments concerning his great pleasure in seeing them. He had spent a small fortune in decorations, hiring over one hundred men and women to prepare foods and beverages, to serve his guests, and to play light orchestra in three separate rooms as well as in the south courtyard adjacent to the rose gardens. Clarissa

was so determined that everything be right; it must be the finest wedding in Yorkshire that anyone could recall. There had to be a proper ball, a formal announcement, a dozen subsequent more informal affairs; then, finally, the wedding, with over one thousand guests invited.

I do this to please Clarissa, he told himself again and again, as hand after hand fell briefly into his and a blur of faces passed his line of vision. Then he held a familiar hand and was brought out of his daze to meet coldly Squire Masterson's casual, smiling greeting. Agatha was close at her brother's side, her expression frozen as if she wore a smiling mask. Benjamin thought she looked quite pretty in pale blue; her high-coifed, powdered wig was flattering to her.

"Squire," Benjamin said regally, bowing his head. "Mistress Agatha. How good of you to come."

"We wouldn't have missed it for the world," the Squire said, loosening his hand from Benjamin's tight grip. "Quite a large gathering. I'd guess a hundred have arrived before us."

"At least," Benjamin said, smiling thinly. "I see you have forsaken your favorite pipe, Squire, for a new one. How odd not to see the carved oak piece which was, one might say, so much a part of your image."

"I'm fickle—tossed it out cruelly, old friend that it was. It began to have a bitter taste—but you wouldn't know, not being a smoking man yourself, about such inevitable corruptions."

"No. Do enjoy yourselves. My house is yours. We have music under the stars, if that appeals to you."

With a noncommittal nod, the Squire took Agatha's arm and moved away, his eye searching the crowded foyer for a glimpse of Clarissa. But it was not until the clock struck ten that she appeared at the top of the long staircase, her red hair piled high up on her head in gleaming coils, one loose ringlet falling over a bare shoulder. The hooped skirt of her gown was strikingly designed, in layers of red satin ruffles, the deep cut bodice of red velvet. She held a black and red lace fan to her chin as she smiled down on the hushed company. Benjamin moved smoothly through the crowd, ascended the stairs to take her arm, and they marched grandly down as the violins played a love ballad. The whispering comments of the hundred and more observing the couple became a mild rumble, many recalling that two years past, almost to the day, it was Sir Ronald who led the lady to her company, and that the man now with his hand firm on her elbow

was the very same who had gone mad, slapping down Clarissa's fiancé with a fist to the jaw. Who could have predicted this event? Lady Darby, of course—all the child's life telling her that Jason would return and claim her for his bride. God protect her, poor child, her doom was upon her.

Benjamin and Clarissa proceeded to the ballroom where they led the dance, their eyes locked together; they moved with grace about the floor, a magnificent pair, one no more handsome than the other. Quickly other couples followed their lead, and the ball was officially opened. By half past eleven whatever tension had existed at the outset seemed to have dissolved; the atmosphere had become light and natural. Clarissa's obscure cousin, called from Ireland for the duty, made the expected announcement in a stuttering, self-conscious twang, and a round of applause followed. Bursts of congratulation came from a hundred mouths at once; the couple was fairly trampled by those eager to speak their enthusiastic if somewhat belabored approval. Squire Masterson held Clarissa's hands in his for a moment, a look of deep sadness crossing his face; it was quickly replaced by a smile that did not progress past his mouth, his eyes remaining dark and withdrawn.

Benjamin leaned forward to say close to Masterson's ear, "Your loss is my gain, sir. I have you to thank."

Masterson let loose of Clarissa's hands, turning his head to meet Benjamin's eyes. "Who has gained, and who has lost," he said softly, "remains to be seen."

Benjamin stiffened, glancing to see if Clarissa had heard the man's rude remark. She had not; she was in animated conversation with Lydia Hodgkinson.

"I dislike the tone of that statement," he said roughly to the Squire. "She has told me everything regarding that certain matter once of great concern to me. I'm sure you know of what I speak."

"Everything?"

"Yes!"

"I honestly doubt that very much. But this is neither the time nor the place for such a discussion. My best regards and sincere wishes to you both."

The Squire promptly vanished into the group milling tight around him, and Benjamin had no opportunity to say more. Relaxing, he leaned on one foot, offering empty words to those who approached him, his thoughts straying. He had wanted to face the Squire with the pipe immediately following the discovery of the body, out of rage as well as a morbid curiosity and dread. But there

could be no accusation of murder: Benjamin could have picked up the pipe anywhere at all; he didn't possess a whit of proof. To call attention to the body would only turn accusations against himself; he had told Agatha he would slit the woman's throat. He had found the body in the lower regions? Found it indeed . . . The thought of that creature rotting below in her crevice grave brought chills to his flesh night after night; he was still continuously disturbed by the sounds of prowling, as though she still lived, intent on her mysterious search even in death. And it did not escape him that it might be Masterson stealthily moving above in the forgotten chambers. There would be a brief silence, then again the sound of footsteps, a thud and clatter. He had considered sealing off the door, but to order such work done would raise a suspicion he was reluctant to raise.

What had Masterson meant: "Who has gained, and who has lost, remains to be seen"? How mad was he to consider a second and a third murder? Good Lord, there could be more. Lady Darby. And Radcliff! He must act soon.

"Jason—my darling, isn't it time to order the refreshments served?"

Startled, Benjamin turned to meet Clarissa's smiling suggestion. "Yes, of course, my dear. I'll see to it at once."

It was past two in the morning before the last guests took their leave. Clarissa whirled jubilantly round and round the vacant ballroom floor, as Benjamin smiled from a chair against the wall. "Oh, it was so lovely, my darling. My darling Jason, it was the most wonderful ball ever—ever." She ran to him, kissing him ardently on the mouth. "Thank you so much. I have never been more happy. Did you *see* their faces when I appeared? Did you? Mother would have simply yowled with envy—raged with envy." She whirled away, laughing gaily, not half her energy spent, so spirited and explosive was her nature.

"Clarissa, what do you mean?" he asked her, as she danced close past him. "That your mother would have yowled with envy."

"She hated me," she sang, whirling and bowing to him, "for being beautiful, didn't you know? More beautiful than she had ever been. Then, my darling, was when we grew apart, when I was no longer in braids—but a woman, a beautiful woman, and young, while she had become a dried fig of a hag."

"That is ridiculous!"

She stopped short, sobering. Swaying a little under the

influence of the glasses of wine she had sipped one after another, she glared at him. "I am *never* ridiculous."

"I didn't mean— What I meant to say was, it's difficult to see why your mother would loathe you for being lovely, rather love you all the more."

"Are you suggesting that I am speaking a deliberate lie!"

"Certainly not. Come here. Kiss me again."

"No. I'm angry with you. Now you've spoiled it, my grand glow."

"Forgive me?"

"Well, I shouldn't," she pouted, then ran to throw herself into his arms. She knelt before him, her arms tight around his waist. "She did loathe me to grow up," she murmured against his heart.

"Perhaps because becoming a woman changed you, as adulthood alters every one of us. A sense of loss . . ."

"Loss!" Her head snapped back, her eyes bright with a peculiar fire. "I could tell you things *no one* knows, regarding my mother's *tragic* losses. Could I *not!* She was an impostor, an actress of supreme talent. Such performances, enough to—" Abruptly she ceased talking, a quick smile illuminating her face. "Ah, my love, my dear love. Forgive me. It is I who spoils the glow. It *was* a beautiful ball, wasn't it?"

"It was," he said huskily, putting a hand to each side of her face. "Stay with me. Don't go back to Briarmoor."

"Now, Jason, not that again, please. My coachman waits. Six weeks. Is that so long to wait, when we have our entire lives?"

"Far too long."

"Silly man. I must go. And I shall sleep all day. A week hence: the Briarmoor affair." Her mood altered once again, her eyes momentarily vacant in reflection. "Do you know what Edmund said to me, why he asked me to come and see him? He begged me not to marry you, *begged* me. Can you imagine! I was so thunderstruck I couldn't find words. I fear I made a miserable mess of it; I was positively tongue-tied."

Benjamin nervously cleared his throat against a fist. "Did he at the same time plead with you to marry him instead?"

"Gracious no! He suggested that I was—how did he put it?—in love with an idea, no, an *illusion*. Yes, that's how he put it: in love with an *illusion*."

"Namely, me."

"Of course, you—an *illusion* of Jason Darby."

"I am—no illusion."

"Ah, that you are not, my love," she laughed, rising to her feet. "And I believe I managed to make that quite clear to him. He mentioned the gypsy woman, too; he asked me if I could remember seeing her at Hedgewood when I was a child, or later. I said of course not, but he seemed unsatisfied, pressing me with the question; as to whether or not I was absolutely positive. Heaven forbid, what a frightful creature."

"What did the gypsy say to you?" he asked casually, "The day she broke in on you? You've never said."

"Oh—I have no idea, now. I've completely forgotten, completely. I was very ill; I can't remember a word of it. Mostly it was her grizzly appearance, I should say, that frightened me so. Do see me to my coach, Jason. A last kiss, and I'll be off—to dream—to dream of the eighth day of June, our *wedding day*."

The day was at last more than prevision. So long the intangible stuff of past and future, it had with apparent suddenness emerged to become now; his wedding day, the eighth day of June. Clarissa, in antique white lace, a transparent veil fountaining over her shining face, walked toward Benjamin down the wide aisle of the York Cathedral, like a rose blooming again in its original glory. It was her mother's wedding gown she wore, it was her mother's face glowing behind the veil, it was Jason Darby she approached to join herself to him as his wife forever in the sight of God. As he watched her slow approach—closer, closer—he was suddenly overcome by a sense of impending doom that set his senses reeling. Enemies surrounded him; he felt like a man awaiting execution, the hour of his death established; notified—forewarned—*I said good-bye to that which I had cherished all my days, and my father before me, and his father before him. Hedgewood Manor was mine. I vowed that I would ascend from Hell, to have it back again, to stand on the headland and know that all my eye beheld, on three sides, belonged to me. From the grave, if that was to be my early fate, I would return to Clarissa—to Clarissa—Clarissa—*

Benjamin swayed on his feet, sheer will holding him erect as nausea and headiness threatened him. It was a dream, pure illusion, *not* memory ... Nothing was right except Clarissa; all else was perverted, out of focus—the faces unfamiliar. Ronald was absent, his place filled by a

stranger. The guests crowding the enormous cathedral were all strangers to him; he was in the throes of a warped reality. The sound of the sea thundered in his ears. Like a puppet on a string, he reacted to it all, spoke his vows, made the proper motions, sick to the depths with the conviction that this—this day—was to be his last on earth. Before another sunrise, he would be found floating face-down on the sea. No sons would be left to mourn him, to stand in his place. Hedgewood would be in the hands of Grandisons. It was done. He was defeated—dead.

At the reception, the noisy, crowded rooms stifled him. Then Clarissa sat beside him in his coach on the interminable journey from York to Hedgewood. She spoke gaily, and he replied with a false carelessness; the closer he came to the house, the more intense his dread became. Mercy was opening the door wide now, a smile thinly drawing up the corners of her tight, spinster's mouth. The clock in the foyer was striking eight, as Clarissa kissed him, passionately, before so much as removing her cloak and hat.

"Husband," she murmured against his lips, her arms tight about his neck. "I will stay tonight. Never again will I return to Briarmoor." She drew back from him, frowning. "My darling, what is it? Your expression is so grim. Are you ill?"

"No," he whispered, turning away to hide the emotions broiling inside him, removing his cloak as an excuse for putting his back to her.

"All day you have seemed—well, sorrowful. Do you feel regret so quickly? Jason, tell me."

"No!" he shouted, unable to hold rein on his shattered nerves. "No; I don't regret having married you. I love you, Clarissa."

"Oh, I am sorry. Forgive me, Jason." She threw off her cloak into Mercy's arms, reaching to take his shoulders in her hands, turning him to face her. "We're home, Jason. Mercy has prepared our wedding supper. Let's not spoil this day with a quarrel. It's a night for love."

"For love," he echoed, his dark eyes probing deep into hers, searching for an answer. "Clarissa?" he asked her solemnly. "When did you stop hating me, and begin to love me; when?"

"Jason! I never hated you."

"But you did. Don't you remember our first meeting, at Briarmoor Town House?"

"Briarmoor Town House? Whatever ails you, my darling? We met on the road near the Grimsby house, at the

wayside well—on a lovely Sunday afternoon. You've forgotten. I was ten at the time, a hideous little ragtail in braids, dirt on my face."

Benjamin frowned at her. "What . . ."

"Madam Darby, shall I order the serving o' supper?" Mercy said in a peculiarly high-pitched voice.

"Oh yes, yes, of course, Mercy. Come, Jason, we'll wine and dine, and then—" With that, she spun away from him, fairly dancing across the foyer toward the dining room.

Mercy hung back, her limpid eyes fixed on Benjamin. When he glanced up, catching her eyes, she burst into motion, her scrawny hands fluttering nervously over the cloaks as she carried them to closet. He thought that she had looked as though she were studying a corpse about to be entombed. He couldn't decide whether her peculiar expression denoted a wish that he were dead, or a foreknowledge of his fate. At any rate, she was obviously as aware as he of the thick atmosphere that pervaded the house.

At last he managed to follow his bride into the dining room. He stood in the archway, gazing at the decorated table, the soft candlelight, the apparent tranquillity of the hearth, his home, and his wife. But behind the facade lurked the gypsy woman, at the foot of the table, speaking in perfect English—"Spat on my Jason's name. She is obscene, a devil. I had been warned but I would not listen. The sea. Murder! —Murder!"

"Ja-son, oh, Ja-son," Clarissa sighed, her arms reaching out to him. "Clarissa and Jason, forever. Come, kiss me quickly, before the servants appear. Come . . ."

◆ CHAPTER FOURTEEN ◆

Clarissa had had her mother's room completely renovated for their personal use; this was the chamber to which she tremulously led her new husband shortly after ten o'clock. They held hands as they took the stairs, she leaning her head into his shoulder and sighing happily. As they reached the landing a rush of wind brushed against Benjamin's face, and he stiffened, his eyes darting down the passageway to the left and right. She was in front of

the chamber door, a swiftly expanding flame of passion, two white-hot globes full center, her living eyes. He saw her, blocking their path, and didn't know what to say or do. Clarissa was oblivious to everything except his hand in hers and the moments ahead of them. He stopped, swinging his arms tight around his wife in a desperate embrace. She gave a startled cry, then she laughed, responding with complete abandon to his urgency. Holding her, he eased himself aside, until his back was against the door of his own room. He put a hand behind him, turned the latch, and with a quick lunge pulled her into the dark chamber, kicking the door closed behind them.

"Jason—" she wailed in the dark. "Not here, I—"

He stopped her protest with a hard kiss, conflicting emotions a hurricane in his brain. His fear had not in the least dampened his desire for this woman warm in his arms. Only for one night; if that was all, let it be a night to hold for eternity. She dissolved under the pressure of his demanding kisses, but at last breathlessly pulled away from him, complaining that Mercy had laid out a silk nightgown of black lace that she had had designed and stitched specially—he was spoiling all her plans.

"Please," she pleaded sweetly. "Jason, please—allow me a moment. There is the entire night, and a thousand tomorrows."

"You can't go *near* that room," he exclaimed, pulling her tighter to him.

"Whyever not?"

"Clarissa . . ."

"Why not, I say?"

"She—I saw her, waiting for us, blocking the door."

"She? Do you mean—? Oh, Jason, you've allowed your imagination to run away with you again. I'll be just a moment. A few moments . . ."

She was away from his arms and out the door before he could restrain her. His heart in his throat, he lunged after her. The glow was strongly present, a chill wind slicing every which way across and along the corridor, but Clarissa was apparently blind to the fast-forming configuration; ahead of him, moving swiftly, she passed through the substance, throwing open the door. A harsh laugh shattered the silence, a laugh of triumph and defiance, and he could not determine from which throat it had emerged: the dead, or the living. He stepped apprehensively toward the writhing, voiceless specter, an irrational guilt gnawing at him; he had betrayed her, was about to take for himself a mistress, to her intense jealousy and rage. When he was

quite close, her living eyes boring into him, he made a dash—and was quickly inside, slamming the door hard in the hag's face. Hag. Dear God, she had been more beautiful than—

"Jason! For heaven's sake, you're impossible. Slamming doors, following me about like a pet on a leash. I said I would only be a few moments."

"You didn't see—it?"

"I saw nothing!"

"But—you heard the laugh, you couldn't have missed—"

"Laugh? You're being irrational, Jason."

"Forgive me," he groaned, covering his face with his hands. "The strain. These have been hard months. I fear I'm the worse for it."

"Not *too* exhausted, I hope," she said coyly, as she vanished behind a dressing screen.

"No fear of *that*," he said, trying to laugh.

"Agatha wept, did you notice?" she called from behind the screen.

"No, I noticed little; I'm afraid I was in a daze through it all."

"Well, she certainly did, shamelessly. Poor dear, she never was good at hiding her emotions, always wearing her heart on her sleeve, as they say. When we were children, listening to Mother's tales about you—I remember seeing in her eyes such *jealousy*, because Mother said you were coming for *me*. Obviously, she hasn't gotten over it."

Benjamin moved to fall onto the bed, his eyes sliding morbidly about the well-lighted room. A closed door would not keep her out. "I can't help being flattered," he said uneasily. "Agatha is a fine woman. A man could do worse."

"Really!" she exclaimed in mock annoyance, emerging from behind the screen—a vision in black, transparent lace. "I resent such reflections on this particular night."

"Wife," he said, eyes devouring her, "you look . . ." He was on his feet, rushing to clasp her in his arms.

"Say it. How do I look?" she teased, nibbling his ear.

"More beautiful than any woman has a right to look. You melt me as the sun melts snow. I'm clay in your hands. I love you—love you—love you, Clarissa . . ."

With an unholy screech she emerged through the door, writhing toward Clarissa and Benjamin. Fully material in form, withered, raging, her flesh falling from her bones as though she'd just risen from the grave. The candles were

extinguished in the wind of her entrance; only the two lamps remained to light the room.

Benjamin gasped and again pulled Clarissa's head into his shoulder, to shield her eyes from such a sight, his own eyes fixed on the apparition in numbed fascination, his insides turning to water. She swirled round and round them where they stood. Mute, and murderous.

Clarissa jerked herself out of Benjamin's death grip on her. Angrily she cried, "What in the world ails you? What's the matter with you? Why did you nearly strangle me like that . . . ?"

Benjamin gaped at her. The apparition was within range of her vision, and she apparently didn't see it. But it was too real—too damned *real* to be a delusion. "Clarissa," he said, taking her arms in his two hands, his fingers biting into her flesh in his urgency. "You must see her—feel the coldness, the wind. The candles have—"

"See who, for the love of God! I don't know what you're talking about. A draft blows out the candles, and you become hysterical."

"Damn," he swore and let go of her, turning to face the hag. "Go—away," he said, choking on the words, "Leave me be or so help me God I will see you in *hell!*"

"Jason—oh—Jason," she wailed in protest, the voice filled with tears and inexplicable agony.

Suddenly Clarissa was in his arms, flesh and bone, her nightgown on the floor at her feet. Her fingers tore at his clothes, until they were flesh to flesh. She pressed the length of herself against the length of him, and he felt drunk, utterly stupefied.

"Didn't I tell you," she whispered, her breath hot in his ear, "if she attempted to come between us, I would laugh at her?"

With that she pressed him back until he fell flat on the bed. She lay on top of him, kissing him, drowning him in her passion, while round and about them objects flew through the air—some smashing against the walls to fall in clattering heaps to the floor. Something struck the bed and Benjamin lurched under his wife, but she pressed him down, whispering persistently in his ear. —Then, as suddenly as she had entered, she was gone, the chamber silent as a tomb.

"I'm sorry, Clarissa," Benjamin whispered heavily after several minutes had passed. "I'm . . . unable to; Clarissa, please forgive me."

She rolled away from him, her mouth turning up in a tight smile. "I forgive you," she murmured. "I under-

stand." Abruptly she was off the bed, moving swiftly across the room to put on a velvet dressing gown. "We'll have our wine now, instead of later. That will relax you, dear. Dear Jason—"

Helplessly he watched her from the bed, as she moved to the cabinet against the far wall, expecting her to vanish any moment. She remained blessedly real, however, returning to the foot of the bed with a pout.

"Blast it, Mercy forgot the wine," she complained. "And I was quite specific about it; champagne for the late hours. Jason, would you mind? It is probably still on ice in the kitchen."

He protested, but quickly demurred at her look of disappointment. Groaning, he rolled off the bed, stumbling around and about the bed for his discarded articles of clothing.

"You had best wear your boots," she suggested, "since you may have to try the wine cellar, if you can't find it on ice."

"Hmm," he mumbled in agreement, hauling on his hose and breeches. "What are you doing?" he asked, as a corner of the room suddenly went dark.

"Extinguishing the lamps—lighting the candles," she answered. "It's far too light in here for the seductive sipping of wine. I like a candle's pale light. Oh, if we had music, played softly by musicians outside our windows, a troubadour singing love songs . . ."

Fully dressed, Benjamin stood and turned to say, "I'll run the entire route, I'll be back before you—" But a blinding light flashed before his eyes, a sharp pain—oblivion.

Gradually Benjamin emerged from unconsciousness. At first his awareness was dulled, the pain so severe at the base of his skull that all else was obliterated—white-hot, searing pain. His entire body was under attack, every muscle and bone screaming in protest. He could barely breathe. An acrid odor struck his nostrils, penetrating a thick barrier between his body and his surroundings. The smell jolted him to his senses—it was the stench of the dungeons, unmistakable. The barrier was, as far as he could determine, a woolen blanket in which he was entirely wrapped and bound, mummy-fashion. His feet were bound together, and he was being dragged across the swampy floor, slowly, arduously dragged. His heart began to leap wildly, as the full implications became clear to him. The

squash of his attacker's boots as they touched the stone floor in regular, slow rhythm through the muck, muck that was soaking through the shroud about his chilled and battered flesh. He must have been let to slide, bounce, and roll down the long staircase. —Clarissa. What had he done to *her*? He opened his mouth to shout, but quickly closed it. Frantically he worked at the binding wool, his fingers searching for the folds. It would be made to look like an accident, or suicide. There would be only a few moments that he could use to advantage—when the rope binding his feet and arms would have to be undone, the shroud removed. In that moment he would take the fiend by surprise—perhaps. Dear God, he must. Fate or no fate—he did not want to die.

The pulling movement stopped. Benjamin held his breath, dead-still, waiting. Heavy breathing over him, hands pushed—and he was sent pitching down a flight of stairs. His head struck granite and once again a thin blackness washed over him.

After what seemed an eternity, he noticed vaguely that the air was fresh. The sea sounded, waves crashing hungrily against the rocky cliffs. The hauling was easy now, for the lawn was slick and steeply sloped. He knew the moment to save himself was at hand, but he had only a fragile hold on his senses; all physical strength seemed lost to him. The rope was jerked from his boots. Gasping for breath, his attacker took hold of the blanket and rolled him out of it.

Benjamin thought he heard horses' hooves—a desperate cry; then a boot struck his back and he plunged over the cliff, to be caught by the arms of the funeral sea. She took him gently, drawing him deep into her bosom, into the silence of his grave. She flowed into him, filled him, was drowning him, and he could not fight her. Jason Darby was dying—again.

"Benjamin!" a masculine, desperate voice called from far away.

The smell of sweet grass, clear, earthly air. He opened his eyes to see a dark greenness under him, his face buried in it. Pressure against his back, rhythmic. He groaned, vomiting up the sea, then more of her. Hands were on him, rolling him over. Numb, he stared up into Squire Masterson's concerned face.

"Benjamin," the Squire exhaled, "Thank God, you're all right. I was nearly too late . . ."

"Too—late?" Benjamin whispered, coughing violently as salt water surged from his stomach and lungs to fill his throat. He threw his head aside and spit it up, gasping for breath. "I—am—dead," he said to the grass. "Drowned."

"You would have been—had I not come when I did."

"You? You tried to kill me. Why? Why did you do this to me—jealousy?"

"For God's sake, man—I dove in after you. I pumped the sea out of you..."

"It was you. You dragged me through the—the dungeons, to toss me into—"

"Try to sit up. Can you sit yourself up? Here, I'll help you."

In a sitting position, hunched over, Masterson supporting him lightly, Benjamin moaned, "Clarissa—what have you done to her?"

"Breathe deeply if you can," the Squire insisted. "That's the way." He produced a woolen cloak, tossing it over Benjamin's shoulders, and wrapping it around him. "I wager Clarissa is in your bridal chamber, waiting for you," he said, pain and a deep sadness evident in his voice. "However, I wouldn't join her—for the moment."

Benjamin leaned forward to bury his face in his hands. "I remember—I was dressed, and about to—something struck me from behind, I think. The next thing I knew . . . Squire, what kind of game are you playing? Do you deny that it was you who struck me? Can you deny it?"

"I most definitely deny it!"

"The gypsy . . . I found your pipe—beside her body." With that he jerked his hands away from his face, hardly meeting Masterson's eyes.

"So that's where I lost it. I wasn't certain. It must have fallen from my pocket when I bent over her. And you thought I'd killed her. No, Benjamin. Agatha brought a message to me, supposedly from Lady Darby—she had said I had 'the key.' I surmised that she was referring to the key she gave me to the door leading to the dungeons. I rushed there—and came on poor Catalina's body. To be honest with you, I've spent a great deal of time in your house, without your knowledge, in the past few months. But this is not the time nor the place to talk. Can you get up? Are you steady enough?"

Benjamin struggled to get to his feet but failed, collapsing to sprawl on the grass, coughing painfully. Masterson helped him to a sitting position, telling him that a few minutes more in the night air would probably not harm

'him; the Squire preferred not to put him through the indignity of being carried.

"Clarissa," Benjamin whispered. "I must go to her. She'll be beside herself with worry." He blinked, frowning. "Squire how can you know that she's waiting for me in our bedchamber, unless— Have you seen her? Surely whoever attacked me wouldn't fail to thwart her efforts to save me, by . . ."

"Benjamin! Hasn't it occurred to you—that Clarissa was the one who struck you, dragged you here to your—"

Benjamin lunged forward, his hands aimed at Master-
son's throat, but he missed his mark and fell sideways.

The Squire caught him, once again helping him regain his balance. "If I had struck you," he smiled, "I wouldn't have been forced to tie you in blankets and drag you. I'm a strong man. Carrying you would not have been that easy, but I could have managed it."

"For Christ's sake, Benjamin! Do you think that I, any more than you, want to believe her capable of such an act? I've loved her since she was a child. Fool. You damned fool, you listen only to your own thoughts, blind to everything else, bent on self-annihilation. Do you know why you are alive this moment and not dead in that water? *She came to me—through the portrait—*"

"She?" Benjamin interrupted harshly.

"She. Lady Darby. I've believed in the supernatural for many years—but this was an experience that I'll never forget as long as I live. Before my eyes her face in the portrait transformed into a death's head, and from the mouth came words of warning, desperate pleas that I come to Jason's aid or he would die.

"At first I thought myself deranged, but then I put two and two together. What I had learned the past months, about the woman I love more than anyone on this earth. . . ."

"No," Benjamin protested, "I will not listen to you."

"You must settle it once and for all in your mind."

"You murdered Lady Darby—and my friend, in Lon-
don—you stole the papers, but couldn't find the will. So you went in search of Benjamin Thorn, knowing full well she had named him—"

"Ridiculous. You're raving, making no sense at all. But for me you wouldn't *have* the estate, and you know it. I was in a better position to have Hedgewood for myself as Clarissa's lover. I could have left you to rot in London."

"You were *never* her lover! She told me how it was between you."

"I was her lover. She carried my child, briefly." He

halted, his voice breaking. "And aborted it. There were other men . . ."

"Liar!"

"No. For four years we met secretly, and she held back nothing of herself. Forgive me; a beastly thing to tell a husband on his wedding night, but you must accept the—"

"I accept nothing, on your say-so, sir. She would not lie to me." A knot grew in his throat, choking off further words.

"Benjamin, let me bring the news that you are dead to her at dawn . . ."

"What!"

"Wait now, listen to me. That is just how Lady Darby received the news of Jason's death—at dawn, from a local constable. We'll offer Clarissa the shocking news, and see what happens. It's the only way for you ever to know for certain, Benjamin."

"I am certain. It was not Clarissa. She loves me. — Ronald! I saw him, riding toward me out of the woods. I saw him. He was jealous, you see, and those debts to him, unpaid—now I had married his sister he would never receive payment.

"It was *not* Clarissa. She loves me . . ."

Squire Masterson shook his head pityingly, and moved to lift Benjamin to his feet. He threw one of the man's arms over his own strong shoulder and forced Benjamin to walk away from the house toward the road. His small carriage was waiting, well hidden from the house, behind tall trees. The Squire dumped Benjamin inside and took the reins himself, speeding them toward Withernsea Grange and the warmth of a small deserted cottage on the outlands of the property.

When the sun had just risen, Squire Masterson firmly pulled the bell chain. There was an extended silence. He rocked uneasily from foot to foot, then once again yanked the chain. Muffled footsteps. Mercy, in a white nightcap, a woolen robe over her sleeping shift, peered drowsily around the crack she had allowed in the doorway.

"Squire!" she exclaimed, squinting her colorless eyes against the sun. "A peculiar hour, I must say, ta be paying a call."

"I must see Lady Darby—at once. I have grave news."

The woman's face paled and she slowly opened the door, avoiding the Squire's probing eyes.

"Is she asleep?" he asked.

"I presume so, sir. Is it such news that I must wake them? I think me master'll skin me alive for—"

"Your master is dead," he stated flatly, closely watching her face.

"Dead ya say," she gasped, clasping her hands over her bosom. "It cannot be . . ."

"I fear so. Drowned. A terrible accident."

"But—they be in their chamber. I heard them laughing and carrying on 'alf the night. Ya must be mistaken . . ."

"I fear not. I identified the body. The Constable sent for me just before dawn—and I came straight here, of course. She hasn't called you, concerned at his absence?"

"No—I didn't know 'ee was gone anywhere at all."

Masterson was inside, she moving back as he pressed forward. He firmly closed the door. "I'll see her in her chamber," he said, and moved toward the stairs.

Mercy made no complaint, silently following at his heels. But at the second-floor landing, as they approached the bridal chamber, she suddenly burst into tears.

"I cannot do it—I cannot be the one ta tell 'er. I couldn't stand ta see 'er suffer so . . ."

"You are in no state to approach her, I agree," he said, turning coldly to examine the sniffling woman. "I will see to it alone. —Do you have a kerchief? She'll need one, I fear."

"But—she'll be needing *me* . . ."

"No. She will not be needing you. I believe you have given her sufficient aid already. —A kerchief?"

Mercy hesitated a moment, then from the pocket of her frayed robe brought forth a monogrammed linen. As she handed it to him, her mood altered dramatically, her eyes now blazing. "I would die for 'er—you 'ear?—die for 'er!"

"I believe you would," he said, with a cold smile. "Your devotion is touching. Now go to your room and stay there. Do as I say!"

She clenched her teeth, seemed determined to defy him, then abruptly obeyed his command, vanishing around the passageway curve.

Masterson moved quickly to the door of the bridal chamber. Without knocking he entered silently, softly closing the door behind him. In the dim light he saw her, her red hair spilling over white pillows; she was sprawled across the large bed in a deep sleep. He moved closer, to stand sorrowfully at the foot of the bed. Her face was lovely, so very innocent—like a child without a care.

Soundlessly he stepped around the bed and sat down on the edge.

"Clarissa?" he whispered. "Clarissa, wake up."

She squirmed and rolled over, turning her face away from him. He reached out and touched her shoulder gently, and she started, whipping around in surprise.

"Edmund!" she exclaimed in amazement. She tried to sit up, but he pushed her back with both hands, again gently.

"Good morning, my dear. You slept well, I presume."

"Yes, of course," she murmured drowsily, yawning and stretching. "But—what in God's name are you doing in this room?"

"I came to tell you that I love you—that I have always loved you and always will."

"What?" She frowned tilting her head aside as she examined his face in bewilderment.

"I also came," he persisted, a harshness in his tone now, "to inform you that your husband is dead."

Clarissa gaped at him in disbelief, the light in her eyes fading. She shook her head slightly, then harder. "No—; no, he's not dead. Jason's not dead," a whimpering denial.

"He was murdered. Thrown over the cliff into the sea."

"Liar!" she screeched, lurching to a sitting position on the bed, eyes wild. "He's with me, as ever—; he only just left me—just moments ago he left me; he said I should tell—tell—. Dead? Did you say *murdered*? Ronald! damn him to hell for eternity. God damn my brother's soul forever. Who are you? Who *are* you! I don't know you—."

"You murdered him, Clarissa," Masterson whispered, as he moved a hand into a pocket of his riding jacket.

"No! It was *Ronald*; the debts against Jason—; he'd never collect now, because he know how much I loved him—loved Jason. Ronald? Isn't Ronald—in London, Edmund?"

"Yes, my dear. Ronald is in London."

"Hedgewood is *mine!*" she screamed, clutching at Masterson's sleeves in her hysteria. "He had no right to it. The Darbys *stole* it. I have it now—and I shall *keep* it!"

"You *killed* him," he insisted, in a tone that demanded the truth from her.

"Yes, damn you! I killed him. Dear Jason, he never knew what...."

With a swift move of one arm Masterson shoved her back against the pillows and fastened a hand over her mouth. In his other hand he held the silver dagger he had

taken from his pocket. A muffled cry strained against his palm; her eyes widened, staring in disbelief into his eyes. She began to squirm wildly, her throat constricted with stifled screams of terror. Savagely he slashed the knife across her throat—and her blood rose in a warm geyser to spill over her face, the pillows; it was so near the color of her hair, her gleaming red hair. He slowly took his hand away from her mouth.

"Ed-mund" she hissed, eyes on fire again. "It's *mine*. I—I shall—have it back. Wait—and see!"

Her head dropped aside, her eyes open and staring. Masterson, his face, hands, and clothing stained with her blood, slowly and unsteadily rose from the bed. Leaning forward, he placed the knife on her silken hair, and he dropped Mercy's kerchief to the floor beside the bed.

He whispered, "Good-bye, Clarissa," and moved purposefully into the hidden passageway, through the sliding wall panel.

He went up the stairs, into the sealed off chambers, where he found the basin of water and fresh apparel exactly where he'd left them. He buried the bloodstained clothing under moldering debris, washed the evidence of murder from his body—and within a quarter of an hour was once again in the bedchamber, in identical but unstained clothing. He did not look at her body but passed through quickly, out into the corridor toward Mercy's chamber. He beat on her door, demanding that the servant show herself.

Mercy, now dressed in a drab brown uniform, crisp apron and cap, opened the door to the Squire, her expression of stone.

"Come," he said. "Something extraordinary. I swear my eyes deceive me." He took hold of her arm and fairly dragged her to the stair landing, pointing down to the shadowed foyer. "Do you see what I see?" he asked the woman.

Mercy hesitantly followed the direction of his gesture. She stared, eyes widening. "No—!" she screamed, bolting. But the Squire caught hold of her again and forced her to begin a slow descent toward the apparition.

The Master, dripping sea water, stood near the front door as though he had just entered, his eyes vacant, his arms outstretched.

"Dear God in 'eaven—'ees dead—I know—'ee's dead."

Masterson had dragged her to the foot of the stairs. "You know," he exclaimed. "But he is here, Mercy. He

needs dry clothing. You have to believe your eyes. See how he stretches his arms out to you."

The woman fainted, but Masterson jerked on her arm, snapping her out of it. "Now tell me about it, Mercy, all of it," he demanded.

Benjamin, standing at the door, dropped his arms, confused to see Mercy being brought down the stairs and not Clarissa. He stood, staring at the two, mute and unable to move.

Mercy whirled around, her back to Benjamin. "She—she forced me to it I swear—before God. She 'ad it all fixed in 'er mind, she did. The fall from 'er horse—all of it. I 'elped 'er because I love 'er, but it froze me 'eart . . ."

"And was she the one that put a pillow over Lady Darby's face?" the Squire asked, his tone evidencing less rancor toward the woman.

"Aye—I was there—I saw it with me own eyes."

"And the two of you killed the gypsy, when she came on you in the act of ghost-imposturing. Clarissa did ride from Briarmoor some nights—to pretend she was the ghost of Lady Darby . . . ?"

"Aye—aye. It's all true. But I never cut 'er, the gypsy, I never could do such a thing—I held 'er, and she done it with 'er own hand, while I shut me eyes to the 'rror of it.

"She believes it, at times—'tis not always pretend. Sick she is—in the 'ead, poor darling."

"Believes what, Mercy?"

"That she's 'er mother. When she learned the truth it like to killed 'er, it did—and she never were the same again, hated 'er mother; goes out 'er head in spells of madness that comes and goes."

"I watched you from a hiding place, helping her dress in her mother's clothes—for the pretense. I listened, and it seemed to me that you encouraged her to the extreme . . ."

"And what was I supposed ta do—say to 'er 'You're mad, me darling girl, yer mad'? It were all my fault. She never would of knowed were it not for me . . ."

"Known what, for God's sake!"

"That 'er mother killed 'im, 'er precious Jason—done 'im in, sure enough."

"You—lie!" The words tore from Benjamin's throat, as he exploded toward the woman, taking hold of her and jerking her around to face him. "Damn you to hell—you lie!"

Cowering, about to faint, Mercy wailed, "I swear ta

God, it's true. It was me own mother that told me, and she saw it with 'er own eyes. Sir Ronald, 'er brother, 'ee knew 'er, 'ee did—'ee wouldn't of never done such a thing—but 'ee knew *she* would, and 'ee rides up just as she pitches him over the brink: screams like a banshee, 'ee does, and 'ee leaps in to save the Darby, but 'ee could not find him in the dark. Out of love for her 'ee never tells—never. But me mother—she told it to me—and I never meant to tell the child. I hated 'er mother—and come a day it slips off me tongue. It were all my fault, ya see—and I tried to do for 'er all I could to make it up . . ."

"Damn you, tell the truth," Benjamin shouted at the woman, bringing an arm back, then slamming his hand across her face.

"Benjamin!" Masterson roughly hauled the man away from Mercy. "That was uncalled for. Truth is what you're getting, at last. Accept it. Listen to what she has to say. And believe her!"

"It is—it is true," Mercy sobbed. "The day she left 'ere, him taking her home from 'ere, she says to me—'I'll be back, never fear. I mean to have what's rightly mine.' And the night just passed—" She glanced warily at Benjamin who stood rocking on his feet, his eyes closing. "I 'it 'im for 'er, like she told me—and we pitched 'im over.

"What'll happen to 'er, Squire? Poor darling, you cannot do 'er harm . . ."

"There you are," Masterson said to Benjamin. "Thrice a murderer, your sainted Clarissa—who loves you so deeply."

"Thrice?" Benjamin muttered dumbly.

"Your friend in London, of course . . . the death intended for you. Not by her own hand, but she must have paid the man. A professional. Her mother. The gypsy. And—youself, almost, last night. Though you managed to survive, she went to a great deal of trouble to see you dead."

As the horror rose from Benjamin's stomach to his throat, he pitched forward to throw it up, all of it. He thought he heard a mournful whisper: "Yes, Jason, yes." He looked up, met Masterson's pain-filled eyes for a long moment, then burst into tears, his knees buckling under him.

Masterson took Mercy's elbow gently and said, "Come with me, Mercy. We're going to see the Constable. You'll now have the opportunity to die for her. We shall see the measure of your devotion.

"Ah, but I forgot to tell you; Clarissa is dead. You murdered her, cut her throat with your own dagger, and left your kerchief beside her bed. Careless of you."

◆ CHAPTER FIFTEEN ◆

Agatha stood before the cold hearth, her sad eyes fixed on Benjamin as he sat disconsolate in his high-backed chair, his hands clenched together over his lap robe.

"I wanted you to be the first to know," she said low, flushing.

"I'm very happy for you," Benjamin said, glancing up to her drawn face. "Did you say he's a barrister?"

"Yes. And quite well established. His name is Anthony. Anthony Morgan."

"Do you love him?"

She glanced away, down to her trembling hands. "No," she whispered. "You *know*. You have but to say the word, and—"

"Marry him," he said with a thin smile. "You'll love him, in time. I care too much for you, Agatha, to say the words you want to hear."

"But I *love* you, I always have and always will. Why? I . . ."

"Why? Simply that I'd make you miserable, as Edmund has always contended. He is wise in that, and well you know it. No. I'll marry again, one day—I must. But it will be a woman I don't care about, one who promises sturdy sons—and we'll live in misery until our days are done . . ."

"Oh, Benjamin," she cried, turning her back to him. "How terrible that sounds. I can't bear to think of you unhappy all your days."

"Nor can I," he sighed. "A dismal prospect to be sure, but I'm afraid that is my fate. I have my estate, I stand on the headland and all I see on three sides belongs to me. My life is not entirely empty, you see; I do love this land deeply."

"But—to live in this house, with the horror of her murder on the very air. Poor Clarissa. Oh, and I pity Mercy, too. I can't bring myself to loathe her memory. When I hear the talk, when I think of the crowd that gathered to see her hang—" She shivered, bringing her

hands up to cover her face. "If they hadn't found her knife and kerchief beside Clarissa's body, if she hadn't confessed to killing her mistress out of lifelong hatred and envy, I never would have believed it possible. Never. And smothering a helpless old woman, because she had been discharged for petty thievery. Mercy. So frail." Agatha shook her head hard. "It's simply inconceivable."

"Have you heard from Edmund of late?" he asked huskily, his hands tightening their grip on each other.

She turned to face him, her fingers toying with a kerchief. "Yes, only yesterday I received a post from Switzerland. He's been ill; his heart, the doctors say. I'm so worried about him. Ever since Clarissa's death. I believe he did love her, very much."

"Yes," Benjamin said, closing his eyes against the building tension.

"Oh, forgive me," Agatha said quickly. "Benjamin, I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk like this."

"Don't worry. My grief is sharp, but bearable. When you write to Edmund, give him my best, and say to him what I should have said and didn't; simply, 'thank you.'"

"Thank you?" she said, frowning. "I thought you despised him."

"I did. A part of me still does. But he loved her better than I, in a way—and for that I owe him more than I can ever repay. She's still lovely in the minds of all who knew her and loved her. Her grave and her name are honored. Those were gifts to her, from her lover—and from Mercy."

"I—I don't understand," Agatha whispered.

"Don't try to understand it!" he exclaimed quickly. "Marry your Anthony Morgan. Be happy. Will you live in London?"

"Yes. Will you promise to visit, whenever you are in town? Please do."

"I think not, considering. We were not meant for each other, my dear Agatha. A pity."

She was silent for a strained moment, then asked hesitantly, "What of Mercy's claim that Lady Darby murdered her Jason on their wedding night? It isn't possible. Surely, you don't believe—"

"But I do," he interrupted sharply. "I most emphatically believe it."

"But she was so passionately in love with him all her days. Benjamin, I—I lived it, with her. It can't all have been pretense."

"No—not all. She cracked his skull with a candelab-

brum, dragged him to the cliff edge, and threw him into the sea. A Grandson to the depths of her being." He swallowed rising grief, lowering his eyes to his lap. "She—only wanted the estate, you see. Triumphant, for the want of a will; sole heir to Hedgewood, property coveted by her ancestors for centuries. She returned to their bridal room—only to meet face to face with the sea-wet shade of the man she had just murdered. He didn't know that. He had no idea it was she; he saw only Sir Ronald riding hard out of the woods in a brief moment of consciousness."

"Good heavens!" Agatha exclaimed, wide-eyed, believing every word.

"The shock was so severe that her mind closed to what she had done, and she lived in dementia all the rest of her days, believing the romantic illusions she drew for you—and for Clarissa. And he—he believed her when she told him it was Ronald—he also believed the illusions."

"You mean—Jason's ghost?" she asked tremulously.

He raised his eyes an instant, then looked away again. "His ghost," he agreed in a whisper. "My mind falters when I contemplate it, but I have to accept what my heart tells me to be truth; I think he did live here with her all those years, in spirit."

"And vanished suddenly?"

"And vanished."

"Does—does she still haunt you? Is she still here, as always?"

"No. No, she has gone to her grave, content that what she did has been undone, the guilt she kept hidden from herself salved forever."

"But Mercy knew. Then Cora, Mercy's mother, must also have known. Is it possible that Clarissa—"

"I'm very happy for you, Agatha," Benjamin said, rising from his chair. "Don't think further about these things. They're for me to ponder, and to live with. You're destined for contentment; leave it at that."

"But are you—Benjamin, have you found the answers that will give you contentment? Have you discovered why she chose you, why you have all your life been cursed by Jason's thoughts and—"

"No!" he said, too harshly. "And I never shall. I only know I can't give it up. I must live here until I die. Hedgewood is my home, my life. All I am or can ever hope to be rests on this land."

"Then—it's good-bye."

"It is. Most regrettfully. In my own way, I do love you,

Agatha. You are the finest woman I have ever known. I won't forget you."

"And I'll think of you often."

She stood back a moment, then ran from the room, unable any longer to restrain her tears. Her hand on the door latch, she called back toward the drawing room, "Good-bye, Jason. Have sons. May Darbys live at Hedgewood forever."

* * *

On a June day, a public coach drew up at the Chelsea Inn at Hedgeborough, and out of it stepped one Amanda Black. She was a tall, sturdily built young woman of twenty. Her features were remarkably plain, her eyes set too wide apart, her nose slightly hooked, and her mouth full-lipped, inclined to set in a line of arrogant disdain, though she was obviously of the lowest station, with no right to arrogance. She came from nowhere, her history and lineage a secret she jealously guarded.

Amanda was taken on as a barmaid at the Chelsea, working at that occupation a full year before Jason Darby III strode in one night for a flagon of beer. Plain, coldly denying the advances of every man-jack with a mind to bed her down, she merely glanced at young Jason when he fell in her line of vision, his brown eyes casting about for a likely wench to whet his insatiable appetite—and she bloomed instantly. She set her cap for him, then and there, with a preposterous self-assurance, as if the likes of him, the most eligible bachelor in the county, would for a moment consider the likes of her as anything more than a passing fancy for the satisfying of his youthful lust. Young Jason met her blue eyes, she smiled, and, homely as she was, he reacted to that smile as though it was given him by the Princess Royal herself.

On her off hours, Amanda, a girl of many strange moods and a most explosive energy, having saved her money for the purchase of a black mare from Grimsby Stables, would dress in a man's breeches and coat, to ride hell-bent over moors and fields, inevitably finding herself on the headland rising east of Bridington Firth. She would come to a halt, gazing stone-eyed at the rising edifice and the land surrounding her on three sides. The wind blowing her sand-colored hair back from her face, she would slide down from her mount and stand on the headland for hours, moved by the beauty of the old house nearby—touched by a sense of belonging that she could not explain;

it was such a place as she had dreamed of all her days, from as far back as she could recall.

Amanda rode so well that it was said she became part of the beast the instant she sat it, as if trained to the seat. She read books, and could write in a fine, gentlewoman's hand; she composed romantic sonnets, which she would show to no one. And she was never seen without a scarf tied round her throat, to hide an ugly scar, some said. She evidenced a morbid fear of knives, too—knives of any description—refusing to touch one in her duties as barmaid. At the sight of a knife she would gasp and her hand would fly up to clasp her throat, as if to protect herself against attack. It was a peculiar fixation she could not explain even to herself, and of which she could not rid herself; she had tried on many occasions during her life to touch a knife deliberately—but a coldness would come, washing over her, and she would be consumed by a terror that caused her almost to faint.

Soon after their first meeting, young Jason began to make a point of accidentally meeting Amanda in the lanes, on the days she rode for pleasure. They were seen together swimming in the Firth, she clad only in a shift, to the increasing joy of gossips who had begun to speculate on the reaction of The Thorn to the unlikely choice his thirty-year-old son had made. All these years he'd been shouting at the boy to marry and give him grandsons. The Thorn, it seemed, was soon perhaps to receive a grandchild, and out of the womb of a barmaid. He'd never allow it—never: a man who all his days as master of Hedgewood had played the part of a nobleman, raising his only son to believe in the nonexistent nobility of a Thorn calling himself a Darby.

Young Jason brought Amanda Black to his father's house on an afternoon six months after their first meeting, to be inspected by the master. They waited for the elderly gentleman in the drawing room.

On impulse, Jason caught Amanda in his arms, kissing her ardently on the mouth; then he let his lips slide over her cheek to her ear, whispering, "Tonight, Amanda. Meet me on the moor."

She put her hands flat against his chest and pushed him away. Shaking an admonishing finger in his handsome face, she laughed and said, "Now, Jason, no more of that. I shall reach the marriage bed as a lady should."

"Virtuous devil!" he said in mock anger, leaning to kiss her lightly on the tip of her nose.

Her eyes glanced around the room, her hand lifting to

toy with the red silk scarf tied around her throat. "Strange," she murmured. "I feel so strongly that this has happened before—exactly—this very moment."

"Jason? Have you ever experienced such a feeling? You know you've never been somewhere, or said those words, but . . ."

"You're beautiful," he said, grinning at her.

"I *feel* beautiful—sometimes," she said absent-mindedly, her eyes continuing to rove about the room, "I imagine myself with hair piled high on my head, in a bright red gown, with ruffles on ruffles, making an entrance, you know—down a long flight of stairs, with everyone gasping at how lovely I am. But my mirror tells no lies . . . How old is your father?"

"Almost seventy—sixty-eight or nine; I'm uncertain."

"When he dies, the estate will fall to you?"

"Amanda! Are you marrying me for my money?" he exclaimed, smiling.

"Of course," she replied, smiling to indicate that she was not serious.

He laughed heartily. "My mother, the late Lydia Hodgkinson, God rest her soul, married father for his money and thought she'd made a cracking good catch. They were constantly at each other's throats, as I recall. She died of weariness, I believe—battle fatigue."

Amanda smiled at him. "We'll never argue, my darling Jason," she purred. "Dear Jason. I lived all my life, before I met you, waiting for you to come to me."

"But you came to *me*, Amanda, out of nowhere, for me to love."

"Really, Jason. Out of nowhere, indeed."

"That's how the gossip goes."

"But I've told you; I came by coach, from Brighton."

"Why to Hedgeborough? Of all places!"

"I have no idea. I never felt at home anywhere. My father was a drunkard; he died when I was only five years old. Mother worked as a seamstress and couldn't afford to keep me past the age of twelve. I worked from that age on. I saved all I could—and one day packed bag and baggage and took a coach traveling north. There was a special place, I felt—where life was grand; I had wild visions of becoming a noblewoman in a manor house. When the coach drew to a halt at Hedgeborough, I looked out, and knew—I just knew it was where I belonged, and I got out—and stayed. No mystery about it, Jason, just an impulse. Hedgewood House is beautiful, Jason. I love it already."

"It's haunted, you know," he said, his eyes lighted with amusement.

"Yes—I imagine it is," she said, very seriously.

"Father's first wife was murdered on their wedding night, her throat cut from ear to ear."

"Jason!" she cried, lurching to her feet, her hand on her throat.

"It's true. By her jealous maid, who was hung."

"You know I can't bear such things—knives—not even to talk about it."

"Old murders? If you are to be mistress of Hedgewood, you had best get used to talk of murder. A man, Jason Darby the first, no actual relation, a gypsy, and the two Clarissas. It's a house of horror, death—a tomb. As soon as father is in his grave I shall sell out and—"

"Jason! Sell Hedgewood? Never—you couldn't."

"Oh, but you're wrong. I could, and will."

She stared at him, the light in her eyes fading. "Then I shall have to marry your *father*," she said, smiling thinly. "Does he know . . . how you feel? Your intentions?"

"Good Lord, no. He *would* marry again, adopt a son, anything—if he thought . . ."

His words broke off as the door opened behind them. Young Jason whipped around to face his father, very much ill at ease.

"Father," he said, flushing, "I want you to meet Amanda Black. Amanda, my father—Jason Darby."

Amanda turned and smiled warmly upon the old gentleman.